



Leadership for Inclusion: Reimagining Promotion of Discipline and Enhancing Academic Performance in Secondary Schools

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Abstract

Over the last three decades, discipline at schools has consistently posed a challenge, occasionally resulting in poor academic performance among learners. Although various causes within schools have been cited, less emphasis has been placed on the role of leadership in tackling the issue of indiscipline. This study examines how school leadership can promote discipline and enhance academic performance in secondary schools. Using a qualitative research design, data were generated from four secondary schools in the Tshwane North District, Pretoria, in Gauteng Province, South Africa, purposively sampled of 40 teachers (including principals, deputy principals, department heads, and post-level one educators) and 40 learners. Semi-structured interviews and focus group discussions provided valuable insights into leadership practices and their perceived effects on discipline and academic outcomes. The findings reveal that effective leadership, characterised by clear policies, consistent enforcement of rules, and active stakeholder engagement, is crucial for fostering discipline. Strategies such as mentoring, teacher training, and structured behaviour management systems proved essential for maintaining discipline. This study suggests that a perspective, inclusive leadership, which encourages collaboration and empathy, is vital for creating a positive learning environment, reducing disciplinary issues, and enhancing academic achievement.

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Introduction

Despite various policies to improve learner discipline, many schools continue to grapple with disruptive behaviours that adversely affect teaching and learning processes. These challenges often result from a disconnect between well-intentioned policies and their implementation in school environments. While policies provide a framework, the effectiveness of discipline largely depends on how school leaders interpret, adapt, and enforce these policies in their unique contexts. Research shows that when school leaders fail to effectively implement discipline policies, behavioural problems increase and academic outcomes decline (Mestry & Khumalo, 2012; Naong, 2007). Moreover, Botha (2011) found that weak leadership and inconsistent enforcement of discipline contribute to poor learner behaviour and lower academic achievement. This gap between policy and practice not only undermines efforts to maintain discipline but also significantly impacts academic performance, with learners in poorly managed environments consistently underperforming (Van der Westhuizen et al., 2010), as poor instructional leadership and unclear disciplinary procedures are linked to lower learner achievement.

Moreover, the changing socio-economic landscape has brought about new challenges, including increased student absenteeism, peer conflict, and parental disengagement, which impose extra burdens on school leadership. Leaders often lack adequate training or resources to tackle these complex issues effectively. Research shows that schools with robust leadership are better prepared to overcome challenges, ensuring that policies are transformed into actionable strategies that promote both discipline and academic success (Mestry, 2021). This underscores the need for a deeper exploration of how school leaders can adopt innovative context-specific strategies to bridge the gap between policy and practice. By identifying leadership practices that are both practical and effective, this study aims to contribute to creating a disciplined school environment that supports optimal academic performance.

Study Objectives

Emanating from the research question, this study was guided by the following objectives:

To explore effective leadership strategies that foster discipline and contribute to establishing a supportive and structured school environment. The study also aims to investigate how various leadership styles are perceived and enacted by school leaders and stakeholders, and how these leadership approaches are perceived to affect academic performance within schools. Furthermore, this study identifies the challenges confronted by school leaders in promoting discipline, including resource constraints, socio-economic factors, and stakeholder dynamics, and provides actionable insights for enhancement. By addressing these objectives, the study aims to contribute to the body of knowledge on leadership in education, offering practical recommendations to enhance discipline and academic performance in secondary schools.

Literature Review

The role of leadership in shaping school discipline and academic performance has been a key focus in educational research. Effective leadership is recognised as a critical factor in creating a positive school culture where discipline is upheld, and academic outcomes are improved. Various leadership styles, including transformational, transactional, and servant leadership, have been studied to assess their impact on both learner behaviour and academic success. This literature review examines these leadership styles, their practical application in schools, and the challenges leaders face in promoting discipline and achieving academic excellence.

Transformational leadership, characterised by vision, motivation, and fostering innovation, is often highlighted as an effective approach in educational settings. Transformational leaders inspire both teachers and learners to achieve beyond expectations, creating an environment conducive to discipline and academic success (Bass & Riggio, 2020). This finding is echoed in multiple studies, which link transformational leadership with enhanced school climate and learner engagement (Bush, 2018; Leithwood & Azah, 2020). However, critics argue that transformational leadership may falter in contexts where immediate structured responses to disciplinary challenges are required, suggesting a potential need for blending transformational qualities with other styles such as transactional leadership.

Transactional leadership, which focuses on clear structures, rewards, and consequences, is widely acknowledged for maintaining order and addressing

behavioural issues effectively. This approach ensures that rules are consistently applied, providing a stable environment for learning (Northouse, 2021). However, studies show that its limitations include a lack of emphasis on internal motivation and relationship-building, which may reduce its long-term effectiveness in promoting positive behaviour (Johnson & Stewart, 2022 & Mahlangu, 2022). While transactional leadership is beneficial for immediate behaviour management, it may not foster long-term intrinsic discipline among learners, which transformational leadership aims to achieve. Our views align with integrating these styles since blending structured enforcement with motivational elements can address immediate and long-term disciplinary needs.

Servant leadership, which prioritises the growth and well-being of others, offers a unique perspective on discipline. Research shows that servant leaders, through empathy and inclusivity, build trust and encourage self-regulation among learners (Greenleaf Centre for Servant Leadership, 2021). Similar conclusions have been drawn by authors like Harris and Jones (2020) and Mestry (2021), who emphasise that empathetic leadership supports learner discipline through relational trust. However, its effectiveness is often contingent on strong support systems within the school, which may not be present in resource-constrained settings. From our perspective, servant leadership is valuable, but its application in challenging environments requires careful consideration and supplementary strategies. The emphasis on empathy and fostering a collaborative school environment is crucial, but without the appropriate infrastructure and resources, it may not be effective in consistently managing disruptive behaviour.

The connection between school culture, discipline, and academic outcomes is another critical area of exploration. Schools with a positive culture – defined by shared values, mutual respect, and collective accountability – tend to exhibit fewer disciplinary issues and higher academic achievement (Leithwood & Azah, 2020). Additional studies reinforce this view, noting that leadership-driven school culture improves motivation and academic resilience among learners (Bush, 2018; Harris & Jones, 2020). However, creating such a culture requires consistent leadership effort, as misaligned stakeholder expectations can undermine these initiatives. Our research supports the view that cultivating school culture is a long-term process that demands both strategic planning and adaptability from leaders. A positive school culture not only reduces behavioural problems but also creates an atmosphere where students are motivated to excel academically.

Case studies highlight the success of various disciplinary strategies led by school leaders, such as restorative practices, peer mediation and mentoring programs. For instance, studies in South African schools reveal that participatory approaches involving teachers, learners and parents significantly reduce disruptive behaviour (Mestry, 2021; Zulu, 2020; Mthombeni & Maseko, 2022). Other scholars, including Govender (2023) and Nkosi and Molefe (2021), similarly report improved learner conduct through collaborative and community-driven disciplinary models. While these strategies are effective, their success is often hindered by limited resources and resistance from stakeholders. We agree that participatory methods are impactful but argue that they require strong leadership to address these challenges and ensure sustainability. Without the consistent commitment of school leaders to enforce these strategies, even well-designed programmes may fail to yield long-term benefits.

Additionally, a recent study by Johnson and Stewart (2022) emphasises the need for adaptive leadership, which considers the unique needs of the school community in addressing disciplinary issues. This approach calls for school leaders to be flexible and responsive to the dynamics of their specific school contexts, balancing discipline with educational goals. This finding is consistent with work by Mahlangu (2022) and Anderson (2021), who advocate for leadership that evolves based on the school environment. In our view, adaptive leadership is crucial in schools facing frequent challenges in maintaining discipline. It ensures that leaders make timely decisions which benefit both academic performance and the behavioural needs of students.

Conversely, studies indicate that authoritarian leadership, which focuses primarily on control and punishment, tends to be less effective in promoting discipline and improving academic outcomes. While such an approach may initially curb disruptive behaviours, it often leads to resistance and disengagement among students (Anderson, 2021; Chikoko & Mthembu, 2020 & Mahlangu, 2022). Recent evidence by Dlamini and Radebe (2023) further supports this, showing that overly punitive measures result in decreased student morale and increased absenteeism. Moreover, authoritarian leaders may overlook the importance of nurturing relationships within the school community, which can negatively affect both learner motivation and academic performance.

From a broader perspective, the external environment, including socio-economic factors and community support, significantly impacts the effectiveness of leadership strategies. Smith (2023) highlights that leadership alone cannot resolve discipline issues if broader societal challenges, such as poverty and family instability, are not addressed. This perspective is also echoed by Nkosi and Molefe (2021), who found that community partnerships and social services are crucial in supporting school efforts. Thus, while school leadership plays a crucial role, a holistic approach involving the community, parents, and external agencies is essential for achieving lasting improvements in discipline and academic performance.

Finally, the impact of leadership on discipline and academic outcomes can also be seen in how school leaders manage teacher performance and classroom dynamics. Leaders who invest in teacher development through professional development programmes and provide regular feedback on classroom management practices can significantly reduce instances of disruptive behaviour (Harris & Jones, 2020). This is further supported by Mestry (2021) and Mahlangu (2022), who link effective teacher support to improved classroom discipline and academic focus. As such, professional development not only enhances teachers' pedagogical skills but also equips them with tools to maintain a disciplined classroom. We agree with this perspective but emphasise that while teacher training is vital, the school leader's ability to create a culture of support for teachers is just as important in maintaining consistent discipline.

This section concludes by emphasising that leadership is integral to both discipline and academic success but is most effective when supported by broader community and societal factors. A comprehensive approach where school leadership works alongside parents, local communities and external organisations creates a sustainable model for promoting discipline and improving academic performance. Furthermore, research has shown that leadership that focuses on building strong relationships with both teachers and learners fosters trust and mutual respect, which are essential for a positive school culture. In such environments, learners are more likely to

engage in their academic work, display appropriate behaviour, and contribute positively to the school community (Smith, 2023). These findings are consistent with broader literature linking relational trust to learner success (Leithwood & Azah, 2020; Dlamini & Radebe, 2023).

Theoretical Framework

This study is anchored in transformational leadership theory, which provides a robust framework for understanding the role of school leadership in promoting discipline and enhancing academic performance. Transformational leadership is the seminal work of Bass and Riggio (2006), which emphasises the ability of leaders to inspire, motivate, and foster a shared vision among their teams. This theory is particularly relevant in educational settings where leaders must address multifaceted challenges while maintaining a disciplined and conducive learning environment.

Transformational leaders operate through four key dimensions: idealised influence, inspirational motivation, intellectual stimulation, and individualised consideration (Bass & Riggio, 2006). These dimensions are directly applicable to the strategies school leaders employ to manage discipline. For instance, a principal exhibiting exemplary behaviour and ethical decision-making models ideal influence, which inspires both teachers and learners to uphold school rules and values. Similarly, inspirational motivation enables leaders to articulate a compelling vision of a disciplined and high-achieving school, fostering collective commitment to this goal.

Research supports the link between transformational leadership and improved discipline outcomes. Naidoo and Botha (2022) found that schools led by transformational leaders experience lower rates of disruptive behaviour, as such leaders actively engage stakeholders in creating a positive school culture. This aligns with the study's findings, where participants highlighted that school leaders who inspire trust and foster collaboration are more successful in maintaining discipline.

However, transformational leadership is not without challenges. Effective implementation requires support from external stakeholders, such as parents and the Department of Education. This underscores the need for a systemic approach to transformational leadership, where leaders engage with broader networks to address external factors influencing discipline.

By focusing on transformational leadership theory, this study highlights the critical role of visionary and proactive leadership in fostering disciplined schools. It also emphasises the importance of equipping leaders with the skills and support needed to inspire change, ultimately improving both discipline and academic performance.

Methodology

This study adopted a qualitative research design, which is well-suited for exploring the intricate relationship between school leadership, discipline, and academic performance. A case study approach was employed, focusing on selected secondary schools within the Tshwane North District. This design allowed for an in-depth understanding of the context-specific strategies employed by school leaders to enforce discipline and enhance academic outcomes. A qualitative approach also provided a platform for capturing the experiences and perceptions of the participants, which is critical in understanding the nuances of leadership practices in diverse school settings.

Sampling

The participants in this study included principals, deputy principals, heads of departments (HODs), and educators from schools within the Tshwane North District. Four secondary schools were purposively selected from three different quintiles (Quintiles 1, 3, and 5) to ensure socio-economic diversity in the sample. These quintiles, as defined by the National Norms and Standards for School Funding (NNSSF), reflect varying levels of community poverty, with Quintile 1 being the poorest and Quintile 5 the least poor. Schools were selected to represent both under-resourced and better-resourced contexts, allowing the study to explore a range of leadership strategies and challenges in enforcing discipline. The participants (see tables 1 and 2) were chosen because they are directly involved in the day-to-day leadership and management of school discipline and academic performance. Their perspectives were essential in understanding how leadership influences these factors and the challenges they encounter in their roles.

Data Collection Methods

Data collection was carried out through semi-structured interviews and focus group discussions. Semi-structured interviews allowed for flexibility in exploring participant views on specific issues related to leadership, discipline, and academic performance while also providing consistency across all interviews. Focus group discussions gathered insights from educators and school leaders on collective experiences and shared challenges. This approach offered rich, detailed data contributing to a comprehensive understanding of the subject matter.

Table 1

List of Schools and Participants in Tshwane North District from which Data was Generated

<i>School</i>	<i>Portfolio</i>	<i>Age</i>	<i>Level of education</i>	<i>Teaching experience</i>	<i>Gender</i>
School A	Principal A	40-55 years	B.Ed.	34 years	Male
School A	HOD A1	50-55 years	M.Ed.	27 years	Female
School A	Teacher A5	40-50 years	B.Ed.	30 years	Female
School B	Principal B	55-60 years	B.Ed. Honours	33 years	Female
School B	HOD B1	40-45 years	B.Ed.	21 years	Male
School C	Principal C	50-55 years	B.Ed. Honours	34 years	Male
School C	HOD C1	45-50 years	B.Ed. Honours	26 years	Female
School D	Deputy principal D	50-55 years	B.Ed. Honours	29 years	Male
School D	Teacher D1	50-55 years	B.Ed. Honours	30 years	Male

Table 2

List of Districts, Schools, and Learners from which Data was Generated

<i>School</i>	<i>Learner</i>	<i>Age</i>	<i>Grade</i>	<i>Gender</i>
School A	Learner A	15	9	Female
School B	Learner BB	17	11	Male
School C	Learner CC	14	8	Male
School D	Learner DD	16	10	Male
School A	Learner AA	18	12	Female

Data Analysis

For data analysis, thematic analysis was employed to identify recurring patterns, themes, and categories within the data, as described by Onwuegbuzie and Leech (2007). The data was presented using pseudonyms to protect the participants' privacy, and the codes, categories, and emerging themes were examined thematically (Chiovacci, 2020). This method enabled the researchers to draw meaningful conclusions about the leadership strategies that promote discipline and their perceived effects on academic performance. Through this analysis, the study sought to uncover key insights about the interplay between leadership styles, school culture, and academic outcomes, providing recommendations for effective leadership practices in secondary schools.

Presentation and Discussion of Findings

This section presents and discusses the key findings of the study, organised into themes that emerged from the data. These themes are closely aligned with the research questions and highlight the relationship between school leadership, discipline, and academic performance. Each theme combines participant insights with critical engagement with relevant literature to provide a comprehensive understanding of the issues explored. The identified themes in this study include: clear communication of expectations and rule enforcement; mutual respect and positive reinforcement; the influence of discipline on academic performance; challenges in enforcing discipline (including limited resources, resistance to change, socio-economic factors, limited parental involvement, and inconsistent policy support); the role of leadership in addressing discipline challenges; and the influence of leadership styles on discipline and academic performance. The study also explores different leadership styles and their influence on discipline and academic performance, highlighting effective strategies and the challenges school leaders face. The discussion below presents the themes, supported by relevant literature.

Leadership Strategies that Foster Discipline

Clear Communication of Expectations and Rule Enforcement

One of the central findings of the study is the significance of clear communication of behavioural expectations and consistent rule enforcement in promoting discipline and academic success. Principals and teachers consistently highlighted the importance of structured environments where rules are clearly defined and consistently upheld.

One principal explained, *"When students understand what is expected of them and are aware of the consequences of their actions, they are more likely to follow school rules."* This aligns with Robinson et al. (2020), who found that clear behavioural expectations enhance school climate and learning outcomes.

Clear communication serves as a foundation for trust between school leaders, teachers, and learners. When expectations are clearly communicated, it not only reduces ambiguity but also empowers students to take responsibility for their actions. Inconsistent enforcement, on the other hand, was found to undermine credibility, as reflected in learner comments about favouritism. This suggests that consistency is just as critical as clarity in maintaining effective discipline systems. Moreover, clear expectations set by leadership help shape school culture, influencing how discipline is perceived and enacted at every level of the school community.

In addition, clear communication reinforces the legitimacy of school authority by creating a shared understanding of acceptable conduct. When learners perceive rules as transparent and fairly applied, their willingness to cooperate increases, thus reducing resistance and oppositional behaviour. This shared understanding creates a moral framework within which learners operate, shifting discipline from a punitive mechanism to a collaborative social contract. This further enhances learners' sense of belonging, as they view themselves as integral participants in a respectful school environment.

Moreover, effective communication strategies, such as regular assemblies, visual aids in classrooms, and learner involvement in rule-setting, were highlighted as reinforcing behavioural standards. These methods go beyond written codes of conduct by embedding expectations in the daily culture of the school. By making expectations part of the routine discourse, leadership not only guides student behaviour but also nurtures self-discipline, a trait directly linked to sustained academic performance.

Mutual Respect and Positive Reinforcement

Another prominent theme is the role of mutual respect and positive reinforcement in promoting discipline. Teachers observed that respectful teacher-learner relationships contribute to improved behaviour and learning outcomes. One teacher stated, *“When students feel that their efforts are acknowledged, they are motivated to maintain positive behaviour and excel in their work.”*

This observation is supported by Smith and Johnson (2021), who argue that positive reinforcement enhances learner motivation and behaviour management. From a practical perspective, teachers who employ praise, encouragement, and recognition cultivate a sense of belonging and self-worth among learners, which fosters both discipline and academic success. Nonetheless, positive reinforcement must be balanced with accountability. Excessive leniency or failure to address misconduct can diminish its effectiveness, a concern echoed in both participant comments and literature.

Perceived Influence of Discipline on Academic Performance

Participants across all groups consistently reported a strong connection between effective discipline and improved academic performance. School leaders and teachers noted that disciplined environments reduce classroom disruptions, enhance learner focus, and improve attendance, all of which contribute to academic gains. A deputy principal observed, *“In schools where discipline is maintained, we observe fewer disruptions, which directly correlates with better academic performance.”*

These findings are consistent with Patel and Lee (2023), who report that disciplined learning environments support better academic engagement and outcomes. Learners also acknowledged this relationship, with one noting, *“I feel safer and more focused when there is order in the school.”* This supports the conclusion that discipline is not merely a behavioural issue but a foundational component of academic success.

Challenges in Enforcing Discipline

Despite recognising the importance of discipline, participants identified multiple challenges in enforcing it, particularly in under-resourced schools. These challenges include limited resources, resistance to change, socio-economic issues, lack of parental involvement, and inconsistent policy support.

Limited Resources

Participants stressed that resource shortages, including overcrowded classrooms and lack of materials, hampered efforts to enforce discipline. A principal shared, *"We struggle to maintain discipline when we don't even have enough resources or infrastructure."* This reflects Harris et al. (2020), who cite resource scarcity as a key barrier to effective school leadership.

Learners and teachers alike voiced concerns about the lack of resources and external support. One learner said, *"We are told to behave and focus, but how do we do that when our classrooms are overcrowded, and there aren't enough textbooks?"* A teacher echoed this, stating, *"The leadership can only do so much when the basic resources are lacking. We need the department to address these issues for us to enforce discipline effectively."*

A lack of resources often forces educators to focus more on basic survival needs than on enforcing discipline or improving academic quality. For instance, in classrooms lacking adequate desks, stationery, and even physical space, teachers must improvise or reduce instructional time to manage overcrowding and frustration. This shift in focus can lead to inconsistencies in rule enforcement, as the teacher's energy is diverted to logistical rather than pedagogical concerns. As a result, learners may perceive disciplinary expectations as less urgent or relevant, thereby weakening the overall behavioural structure of the school.

Additionally, the leadership's ability to implement policy is severely restricted when infrastructure and material support are inadequate. Principals may endorse clear rules and expectations, but their efforts are undermined when the environment contradicts those standards. For example, enforcing punctuality becomes difficult when learners rely on unreliable public transport or lack school uniforms. This systemic failure risks creating a disconnect between policy and practice, which in turn may erode trust in the leadership's authority.

Resistance to Change

Resistance from both teachers and learners to new disciplinary strategies was another key challenge. As one teacher noted, *"Some teachers resist new policies simply because they're used to the old ways."* This is consistent with Taylor and Harris (2021), who argue that entrenched practices can hinder reform efforts.

Such resistance often stems from a fear of the unknown or a lack of training and confidence in new systems. Teachers accustomed to authoritarian or punitive methods may feel uncomfortable adopting restorative practices, especially if they perceive these as ineffective or overly lenient. Without adequate professional development and administrative support, these educators may revert to outdated strategies, which perpetuates ineffective discipline practices and stifles innovation in school leadership.

From the learners' perspective, adapting to new behavioural expectations—particularly those that involve more autonomy and self-regulation—can be challenging if previous systems emphasized obedience over engagement. In such cases, learners may initially test boundaries or exploit perceived leniency, which can lead to short-term disciplinary issues. However, if leadership addresses resistance through inclusive communication and gradual implementation, long-term behavioural change becomes more likely.

Socio-economic and Community Factors

External socio-economic conditions—such as poverty, family instability, and community violence—were reported to affect learner behaviour. A principal remarked, *“We’re not just addressing behaviour in school; we’re dealing with what happens at home too.”* White and Campbell (2022) affirm that socio-economic stressors often manifest as behavioural challenges in the classroom.

The spill over of trauma and instability from learners’ home environments into the school context can severely compromise their ability to engage in structured academic activities. Children experiencing hunger, abuse, or neglect are less likely to concentrate in class, more likely to act out, and often lack the emotional regulation skills necessary for classroom discipline. This places an additional burden on school leadership to not only enforce rules but also provide emotional and psychological support structures, often without the necessary training or resources.

Moreover, in communities where lawlessness or unemployment is the norm, the school’s role in modelling ethical behaviour and social responsibility becomes even more critical. However, when broader community values conflict with school norms, learners may struggle to internalize school discipline.

Limited Parental Involvement

Educators also expressed concern about the lack of parental engagement in supporting discipline. One teacher stated, *“We do our best, but without parents on board, it’s difficult.”* This is supported by Martin et al. (2020), who found that strong parental involvement enhances the effectiveness of school discipline.

The lack of parental involvement often results from parents’ work constraints, limited education, or feelings of disempowerment in the school context. Many parents in underprivileged communities may not fully understand the role they can play in reinforcing discipline or may believe it falls solely within the school’s domain. This misalignment of expectations weakens the home–school partnership and makes consistent behavioural reinforcement difficult to achieve.

To address this, school leaders must take proactive steps to rebuild parental trust and foster greater engagement. This may involve regular communication, flexible meeting times, or community-based support initiatives. By demystifying the disciplinary process and framing it as a shared responsibility, schools can encourage more consistent parental participation, which in turn strengthens discipline and contributes to a more cohesive learning environment.

Inconsistent Policies and Departmental Support

School leaders reported that policies from the Department of Education are often misaligned with the realities of under-resourced schools. As one HOD explained, *“Policies look good on paper but are hard to implement.”* Williams and Turner (2021) similarly found that top-down policy implementation often fails when it does not account for contextual constraints.

These findings illustrate that enforcing discipline is not solely the responsibility of school leaders; it requires systemic support, adequate resourcing, and active engagement from all stakeholders. A key issue is the lack of policy flexibility to accommodate diverse school contexts. For example, zero-tolerance policies may be ineffective or even harmful in schools where learners face severe socio-economic

adversity. In such environments, strict punitive measures without rehabilitative support can result in higher dropout rates or escalate behavioural issues, thereby defeating the intended purpose of discipline policies.

Furthermore, policy inconsistency across districts creates confusion and fosters a culture of non-compliance among educators. If neighbouring schools implement different interpretations of the same guidelines, it undermines the credibility of leadership and diminishes the perceived legitimacy of disciplinary measures. Effective policy implementation, therefore, requires local consultation, ongoing training, and feedback mechanisms that allow school leaders to adapt directives to their specific contexts.

The Role of Leadership in Addressing Discipline Challenges

Despite these challenges, some school leaders successfully addressed disciplinary issues through collaborative strategies. A head of department shared, *“By working closely with parents and social workers, we saw a significant improvement in students’ behaviour and academic results.”* This finding supports the work of Brown and Edwards (2023), who emphasise the importance of stakeholder collaboration in effective school leadership.

Such approaches suggest that when school leaders engage families, professionals, and the broader community, they can mitigate many of the contextual factors undermining discipline. Collaborative leadership promotes shared responsibility and fosters a supportive environment conducive to both behaviour management and academic achievement.

Leadership Styles and their Influence on Discipline and Academic Performance

Finally, the study explored how different leadership styles affect discipline and academic performance. Participants overwhelmingly endorsed transformational leadership as more effective than authoritarian models. One principal explained, *“When we involve students in decision-making, they take greater responsibility for their actions.”* This aligns with Clark and Sanders (2022) and Bass and Riggio (2006), who argue that transformational leadership fosters accountability and intrinsic motivation among learners. By contrast, authoritarian leadership, which relies on rigid control and limited student agency, was seen as less effective and potentially alienating. The evidence supports the view that empowering leadership styles not only promote better behaviour but also create conditions for academic success.

Conclusion

This article explored the perspectives of the school stakeholders involved in the pivotal role of school leadership in fostering discipline and enhancing academic performance in secondary schools. The findings suggest that by employing transformational leadership strategies, such as clear communication, collaboration, and inspirational vision, school leaders can create a disciplined and conducive learning environment. Additionally, leadership efforts are often challenged by external factors, including limited parental involvement, socio-economic disparities, and insufficient support from the Department of Education. These challenges emphasise the need for a more integrated approach, involving all stakeholders in the education system.

The research enhances our understanding of the cardinality of leadership in inculcating discipline at school and how that can later influence the academic performance of learners. The study further highlights that while effective leadership appears to play a significant role in shaping learner behaviour and supporting academic outcomes, its effectiveness is closely linked to the leader's ability to adapt their approach to the specific context and needs of the school. Moreover, both learners and teachers noted that disciplined environments seem to enhance academic focus and contribute to a sense of safety and mutual respect within the school community.

However, it became evident that the lack of systemic support for leaders often hampers their ability to implement lasting changes, calling for reforms that empower school leaders with adequate resources and authority. Lastly, promoting discipline and academic performance requires a holistic approach that balances strong leadership with collaboration among parents, educators, and policymakers. Transformational leadership emerges as a powerful tool to drive positive change, but its potential can only be fully realised when paired with consistent support from the broader educational ecosystem. The study contributes to the current global debate on the role of leadership in influencing the behaviour of learners and its impact on their academic performance in an ever-changing educational environment. Future research should explore additional strategies to address external challenges and examine the long-term impact of leadership interventions on learner discipline and academic success.

Recommendations

To address the challenges identified in promoting discipline and enhancing academic performance, several actionable recommendations are proposed. Firstly, continuous professional development for school leaders is essential. Regular training workshops and leadership programs should focus on equipping principals, deputy principals, and HODS with advanced skills in conflict resolution, behaviour management, and fostering a positive school culture.

Secondly, fostering collaboration between school leadership, parents, and community stakeholders is crucial for sustainable improvements in discipline. Schools should actively engage parents in decision-making processes, ensuring their involvement in addressing behavioural challenges. Community partnerships can provide additional resources and support, such as counselling services or mentorship programmes for learners. Effective communication channels, such as regular parent-teacher meetings and community forums, should be established to strengthen these relationships.

Lastly, policy reform is necessary to empower school leaders with the authority and resources required to enforce discipline effectively. Current policies often limit the capacity of school leadership to address severe disciplinary issues promptly. As noted by Xaba (2023), the lack of autonomy in decision-making hinders the implementation of timely interventions, leading to prolonged disruptions. Policymakers should revise regulations to grant schools more flexibility in handling disciplinary cases, accompanied by adequate training to prevent misuse. Additionally, increased funding should be allocated to ensure that schools have access to resources such as trained support staff and infrastructural improvements, which are critical in creating a conducive learning environment.

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Informed Consent

- The authors obtained informed consent from all participants.

Conflict of Interest

- The authors declare that there is no conflict of interest.

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