

The theory-practice mismatch in proactive learner discipline management strategies: A mixed-methods study of Malawian secondary schools

Wezzie Memory Mtika¹

Gift Masaiti²

Kapambwe Mwelwa³

¹wezziememory79@gmail.com (+260772845910)

²gift.masaiti@unza.zm

³kmwelwa@unza.zm

^{1,2,3}Department of Educational Administration and Policy Studies, School of Education, University of Zambia

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ABSTRACT

Despite increasing policy emphasis on proactive learner discipline management strategies in schools, their implementation remains uneven in the Malawian education system. This study examined the effectiveness and practical application of proactive discipline strategies in Malawian secondary schools using a mixed-methods embedded design guided by transformational leadership theory and choice theory. The target population comprised school management team members, student council leaders, education managers, and learners who had been suspended or dismissed. Quantitatively, a sample of 380 participants was drawn from twenty secondary schools using stratified random sampling, with sample size determined by the Yamane formula. Qualitatively, purposive sampling was employed to conduct in-depth interviews with 12 participants to capture their lived experiences with disciplinary management strategies. Quantitative data were analysed using descriptive and independent-samples t-tests, while qualitative data was analysed through thematic analysis. The findings revealed a persistent gap between the recognition of preventive strategies and their consistent implementation. While clear school rules received strong endorsement (88.9%), learner participation in decision-making remained limited (56.6%), reflecting continued hesitation toward shared governance. Statistically significant differences were observed between boarding and day schools in the use of positive reinforcement ($p = 0.045$) and supervised study practices ($p = 0.003$), suggesting contextual variation in implementation. Qualitative evidence indicates that proactive efforts are constrained by limited resources, insufficiently trained counselling personnel, and entrenched fault-finding disciplinary cultures, resulting in largely reactive responses to learner misbehaviour. The study concludes that proactive discipline management in Malawian secondary schools is widely recognised but inconsistently implemented, making it more aspirational than operational. It recommends strengthening guidance and counselling services, enhancing learner participation, investing in positive reinforcement, and promoting supportive and proactive discipline strategies to improve learner behavioural outcomes.

Keywords: Discipline Management, Guidance Counselling, Participatory Governance, Proactive Discipline, Secondary Education, Malawi

I. INTRODUCTION

School discipline is not simply about controlling disruptions; it is about creating supportive environments where learners can develop self-regulation, emotional resilience, and essential social skills. How schools manage discipline remains a key factor in educational quality, learner well-being, and institutional stability (Dhlamini, 2016; Belle, 2017). Over the past two decades, global educational discourse has shifted from reactive, punitive approaches toward proactive and restorative frameworks that prioritise learner behavioural development rather than simple compliance (Gregory & Fergus, 2017; Diliberti et al., 2019). This shift is supported by growing evidence that punitive disciplinary practices often contribute to educational disengagement, especially among marginalised learners (Skiba et al., 2014).

In sub-Saharan Africa, school discipline remains both contested and under-researched. Although national policies and international children's rights conventions promote learner-centred pedagogy, disciplinary practices in Malawian secondary schools still largely reflect inherited colonial traditions of authoritarian control and limited learner agency (Dembo, 2024; Harber & Mncube, 2017). Recent studies report persistently high rates of learner misbehaviour together with widespread reliance on suspensions and expulsions (Dembo, 2024; Piliyesi, 2020). These patterns point to a troubling disconnect between progressive policy intentions and day-to-day realities in schools. In response to these challenges, proactive discipline management has emerged as a comprehensive approach that integrates preventive, positive, learner-centered, and restorative strategies to address the underlying causes of learner misconduct before it escalates (Menzies & Lane, 2018).



While punitive practices have received considerable criticism, far less scholarly attention has been paid to the nature and effectiveness of proactive discipline strategies in Malawian secondary schools. In particular, little is known about the implementation gap that is, the difference between what educators and policymakers recognise as effective proactive management strategies and what actually happens in practice. Proactive strategies, which include clear expectations, guidance and counselling, positive reinforcement, supervised academic engagement, and learner participation, are intended to reduce misbehaviour by addressing its root causes. However, the presence of these strategies in policy documents or in teachers' awareness does not automatically translate into consistent implementation.

Malawian secondary schools continue to experience serious disciplinary challenges, including high rates of vandalism, learner unrest, and various forms of misconduct (Zimpita & Sadalaki, 2025; MoEST, 2023). Commonly used discipline management strategies to address these learner misbehaviours are punishments and exclusion strategies, such as suspensions, which are ineffective at addressing the root causes of learner indiscipline. Commonly used strategies are reactive rather than proactive and respond only after learner misbehaviour manifests (Piliyesi, 2020). The persistence of these problems despite repeated policy reforms suggests a fundamental mismatch between theory and practice in the management of proactive discipline. There is a critical knowledge gap regarding the extent to which proactive strategies widely recognised as effective are actually implemented with fidelity, and which factors widen this gap, creating a disconnect between theory and practice. While existing studies have documented preventive practices or described proactive discipline management strategies in general terms, few have empirically examined the implementation gap itself, the space between what is known to work, what educators believe works, and what actually occurs in schools. The paper forms part of a broader mixed-methods investigation into learner discipline management strategies in Malawian secondary schools.

1.1 Statement of the Problem

Malawi's education policy framework increasingly promotes positive, learner-centred, and rights-based approaches to learner discipline through the National Education Sector Investment Plan (2020–2030), the Education Act, and the Study Circle Guidelines (Ministry of Education, 2020; MoEST, 2015). Despite this policy direction, secondary schools continue to experience high levels of punishments, suspensions, vandalism, and learner unrest (Zimpita & Sadalaki, 2025; Dembo, 2024). This persistence suggests a theory–practice mismatch in which proactive discipline management strategies are endorsed in policy but are not consistently implemented in school practice. The study, therefore, examined the gap between policy expectations and disciplinary realities in Malawian secondary schools.

1.2 Research Objectives

- i. To examine the nature and extent of proactive discipline management strategies implemented in Malawian secondary schools.
- ii. To identify the barriers that contribute to the theory–practice mismatch in the implementation of proactive discipline management strategies in Malawian secondary schools.

II. LITERATURE REVIEW

2.1 Theoretical Review

This study is anchored in Glasser's (1998) choice theory and Bass's (1999) transformational leadership theory. These frameworks provide a robust lens for analysing the theory–practice mismatch in the management of preventive learner discipline in Malawian secondary schools. Glasser's Choice Theory maintains that all behaviour is purposeful and directed toward satisfying five fundamental psychological needs: survival, belonging, power, freedom, and fun. In the school context, learners who cannot satisfy their needs for belonging and power through constructive channels often engage in disruptive behaviour. Proactive discipline strategies are therefore most effective when they proactively create school environments that meet these needs through positive relationships, meaningful learners' voices, engaging academic activities, and consistent positive reinforcement. For example, clear rules, behavioural directives and well-delivered guidance services become psychologically powerful tools because they offer structure while nurturing connection, thereby reducing the motivation for misbehaviour.

Complementing this, Bass's Transformational Leadership Theory emphasises the role of school leaders in inspiring and enabling big organisational change. Transformational leaders foster intellectual stimulation, individualised consideration, and a shared vision that moves schools beyond transactional, punitive management toward sustainable proactive systems. Without such leadership, even theoretically sound preventive strategies tend to remain superficial in practice. Together, these theories illuminate both the psychological foundations of effective preventive discipline and the leadership conditions required for successful implementation. They guide the examination of the nature and extent of proactive strategies currently employed in Malawian secondary schools, while helping to uncover the specific barriers that perpetuate the theory–practice mismatch.



2.2 Empirical Review

Educational research consistently highlights a persistent gap between evidence-based practices and their effective implementation in schools. Although contemporary scholarship and policy strongly advocate proactive, supportive approaches, many schools, particularly in resource-constrained African contexts such as Malawi, continue to rely heavily on reactive and punitive measures, resulting in only partial utilisation of proactive discipline management strategies. Preventive learner discipline management refers to proactive strategies that aim to create positive school environments and address the root causes of misbehaviour rather than merely responding to incidents after they occur (Bear, 2015; Gregory & Fergus, 2017). Key elements include establishing clear behavioural expectations (directives), fostering positive teacher-learner relationships, providing psychosocial support through guidance and counselling (advisory services), and engaging learners in shaping school norms.

International evidence, such as the Positive Behavioural Interventions and Supports (PBIS) framework, shows that comprehensive preventive systems can significantly reduce discipline problems when implemented with fidelity (Bradshaw et al., 2012). However, studies in sub-Saharan Africa reveal substantial gaps between these ideals and actual school practices. Gagnon et al. (2021), in their in-depth case study of discipline alignment with PBIS principles in a disadvantaged urban South African primary school, found limited overall congruence between existing policies and proactive best practices. Although rules and directives existed, they were predominantly top-down and authoritarian rather than collaboratively developed. Positive reinforcement and tiered supports were weakly integrated, while punitive responses continued to dominate. The researchers attributed this mismatch to large class sizes, limited staff capacity, resource shortages, and insufficient training, contextual factors that closely parallel those in Malawian secondary schools.

In the Malawian and broader African context, similar dynamics emerge. Dembo (2024) observed lower levels of indiscipline in mission schools, linked more to shared values and community belonging than to harsh enforcement. Mgungwe (2023) highlighted the potential of supervised study circles to foster responsibility and reduce misconduct, provided they receive consistent oversight. Namphande (2021) highlighted the widespread shortage of trained counselling personnel as a major obstacle to the delivery of effective psychosocial support. Mbilinyi (2024) provides particularly valuable insight into advisory services. Her study on secondary school teachers' attitudes toward counselling service provision in Tanzania revealed generally positive attitudes in principle, yet significant gaps in practice. Teachers often viewed counselling as important for addressing emotional, behavioural, and academic challenges, but reported feeling inadequately prepared due to limited training during pre-service programmes. Many teachers manipulated counselling roles alongside heavy teaching workloads without dedicated time, space, or materials. This results in advisory/guidance services being offered inconsistently, often reactively rather than proactively and with reduced effectiveness. These findings mirror challenges likely faced in Malawian secondary schools, where guidance and counselling are often more on paper than in sustained, impactful daily practice.

Regarding directives such as clear rules and expectations, the literature underscores that rules are far more effective when co-developed with learners, fostering ownership and internalisation rather than mere compliance driven by fear (Lundy, 2014). However, Gagnon et al. (2021) observed that in disadvantaged African schools, behavioural directives were often imposed hierarchically, failing to align with preventive and positive behaviour support principles. This top-down approach limits learner buy-in and contributes directly to the theory-practice mismatch. Other proactive strategies, including positive reinforcement, learner involvement in decision-making, and structured academic engagement, show theoretical promise and occasional partial success (Glasser, 1998). Nevertheless, their extent of implementation in Malawian secondary schools remains limited and uneven.

Despite this strong evidence base, the implementation of proactive discipline strategies remains constrained in many resource-limited contexts. Scholars identify key challenges, including limited teacher preparation in positive proactive discipline strategies; large class sizes that restrict individualised attention to learners; insufficient resources to support counselling services and reinforcement programmes, and cultural beliefs that view participatory or supportive approaches as less effective than punitive discipline (Osher et al., 2010; Zondo et al., 2023). Together, these factors help explain why preventive discipline, although widely supported in theory, is often difficult to implement consistently within many school systems. This literature thus provides a solid foundation for the present mixed-methods investigation into both the current state of proactive practices and the specific factors sustaining the implementation gap in Malawian secondary schools.

III. METHODOLOGY

3.1 Research Design

This study adopted a mixed-methods embedded design (Creswell & Creswell, 2018), with quantitative data as the primary method supplemented by qualitative insights to unpack emerging patterns. Persistent reports of student misconduct, particularly vandalism of school property in Malawian secondary schools, highlight the urgent need for

continued research. Such efforts aim to build safer learning environments, elevate academic performance, and nurture students' overall well-being. Pragmatism holds that truth is whatever proves effective in practice. As Creswell (2014) notes, the pragmatic worldview allows researchers to focus on the research problem and to use all available approaches to understand it.

3.2 Study Area

The study was conducted in twenty selected boarding and day secondary schools across two education divisions in Malawi. These divisions were deliberately chosen because they have experienced a notable increase in learner indiscipline, including widespread vandalism of school property, in recent years, across both boarding and day secondary schools. This pattern of disruptive behaviour has raised concerns among educators, administrators, and policymakers about the effectiveness of current discipline management strategies and the need for more proactive strategies. Malawi's secondary education is coordinated through six education divisions under the Ministry of Education. By concentrating on these two divisions, the study achieved a balance between national relevance and manageable depth. This selection not only captured variations in geographic and socio-economic conditions but also provided meaningful insights into the implementation of preventive discipline in school environments where challenges posed by learner misconduct are particularly pronounced.

3.3 Target Population

The study's target population comprised educational administrators, members of the school management team, student council leaders, and dismissed or suspended learners across two education divisions in Malawi. According to the EMIS Report (2023), the total population (N) was 7,518 individuals from whom the study sought to understand the structural conditions shaping preventive discipline management.

3.4 Sampling and Sample Size

A multi-stage sampling technique was employed to ensure representativeness and depth. Stratified random sampling was first used to select schools across the two education divisions, which served as the basis for the quantitative component. The sample size for the survey was determined using Yamane's formula, resulting in 380 participants. For the qualitative strand, purposive sampling was applied to identify 12 key informants, including education managers, head teachers, and dismissed or suspended learners with direct experience in discipline management.

3.5 Data Collection Tools and Procedure

Data were collected through an embedded mixed-methods approach over a four-month fieldwork period. Quantitative data were gathered using a structured questionnaire designed to measure the frequency and perceived efficacy of proactive disciplinary practices. Simultaneously, qualitative data were collected through semi-structured interviews and an extensive review of school disciplinary records. This concurrent collection procedure enabled triangulation of statistical trends with participants' lived experiences, providing a comprehensive view of how proactive strategies address the root causes of misconduct.

3.6 Data Analysis

The final stage of data analysis followed the logic of the embedded mixed-methods design adopted in this study, in which quantitative data served as the core component and qualitative evidence provided supporting evidence. Quantitative data analysis involved the use of statistical methods, including descriptive and inferential statistics, to summarise and test relationships among variables. Qualitative data analysis, on the other hand, used thematic analysis, in which the researcher identified recurring patterns and themes emerging from the narrative data.

3.7 Ethical Considerations

Ethical clearance for the study was obtained from the University of Zambia Research Ethics Committee (HSSREC IRB No 00006464) prior to data collection. The relevant education authorities granted authorisation to conduct the research in Malawian secondary schools. Participation was voluntary, and informed consent was obtained from all participants. Confidentiality and anonymity were strictly maintained, and data were used solely for academic purposes in accordance with established ethical research standards. Data were stored in password-protected files, and the research design prioritised participants' dignity.

IV. FINDINGS & DISCUSSION

4.1 Quantitative Results

This section presents the quantitative findings on the nature and extent of proactive discipline management strategies implemented in Malawian secondary schools. Participants were asked to indicate their level of agreement regarding the utilisation of various proactive discipline management strategies within their schools. Descriptive statistics were used to examine the extent of implementation, and an independent-samples t-test was conducted to determine whether significant differences existed in the implementation of proactive discipline management strategies between boarding and day secondary schools.

4.1.1. Perception of Proactive Discipline Strategies' Utilisation in School

Figure 1 presents participants' perceptions of the implementation of proactive discipline management strategies in their schools. The findings provide an overview of the extent to which proactive approaches are utilised as part of school discipline management practices.

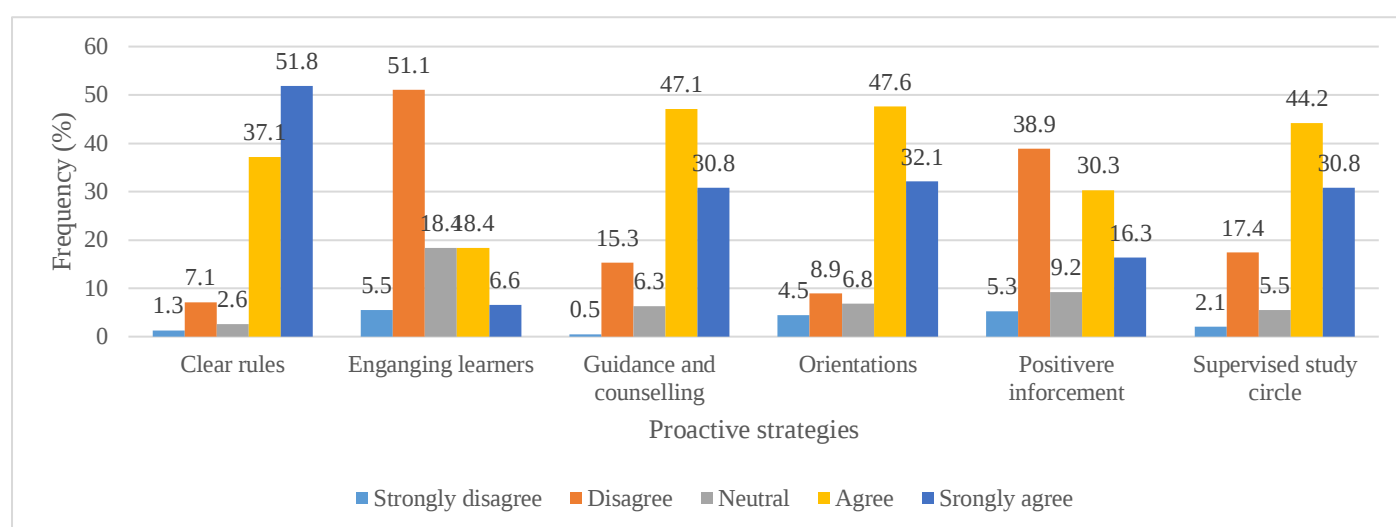


Figure 1
Descriptive Statistics Results

Descriptive statistics indicated strong endorsement of clear school rules (88.9% agreement/strong agreement), positioning them as the most widely implemented preventive strategy. In contrast, engaging learners in decision-making showed the lowest utilisation, with 56.6% of respondents disagreeing or strongly disagreeing with its implementation (implying that only 43.4% gave positive endorsement). This pattern highlights a clear preference for directive, top-down discipline management strategies over more participatory ones.

4.1.2 Independent Samples t-Test Comparing the Implementation of Proactive Discipline Management Strategies by School Type

To examine whether school type influenced the implementation of proactive discipline management strategies, an independent-samples t-test was conducted to compare mean implementation scores between boarding and day secondary schools. The results are presented in Table 1.

Table 1
Independent Samples t-Test Results

Strategy	Boarding M(SD)	Day M(SD)	t-test Sig.
Clear rules	4.27(0.97)	4.36(0.88)	0.363
Engaging learners	2.73(1.03)	2.67(1.07)	0.568
Guidance/counselling	4.01(0.99)	3.84(1.04)	0.106
Orientation	4.03(1.00)	3.85(1.15)	0.108
Positive reinforcement	3.26(1.25)	3.01(1.23)	0.045*
Study circles	4.01(1.07)	3.67(1.12)	0.003*

Note: * $p < 0.05$

The t-test results reveal that positive reinforcement ($p = 0.045$) and supervised study circles ($p = 0.003$) showed statistically significant differences between school types, with one type reporting higher implementation levels. Boarding schools report significantly higher implementation of positive reinforcement and supervised study circles. This suggests that the residential nature of boarding schools enables more structured academic and behavioural monitoring and discipline management than day schools. No statistically significant differences were found for the other four strategies, indicating similar levels of implementation across school types. These quantitative patterns set the stage for deeper qualitative exploration, revealing nuances in implementation quality and contextual influences.

4.2 Qualitative Results

Thematic analysis of interviews revealed three major themes explaining the quantitative patterns. Thematic analysis of in-depth interviews yielded three major themes, namely, Directives (school rules and regulations), Advisory Services (guidance and counselling), and Supportive/Academic Engagement (encompassing study circles, learner participation, and positive reinforcement). Table 2 summarises these themes with key concepts and representative verbatim quotations.

Table 2
Qualitative Summary of Preventive Strategies and Emerging Themes

Emergent Theme	Key Words	Verbatim
Directives	Code of conduct, school rules and regulations, and orientations	<i>Every learner is given a copy of the school code of conduct. We use it to remind them of the standards expected. (HT/6)</i>
Advisory Services	Guidance, counselling, mentoring, psychosocial support	<i>"Guidance and counselling is another way that is helpful, schools that have guidance sessions, misbehaviours are prevented." H/T2.</i>
Supportive services and academic engagement	Supervised study circles, learner engagement, and positive reinforcement,	<i>Schools are supposed to conduct study circles, and when well handled, they are very effective strategies that help minimise misbehaviour, especially when supervised by teachers (HT/1).</i> <i>"Positive reinforcement helps us prevent misbehaviour before it starts. When students know their efforts will be recognised, they don't act out as much. Praising good behaviour builds trust and learners feel seen, and they are less likely to resist rules." (H/T4)</i>

These themes are then discussed in detail, integrating quantitative findings with verbatim insights, theoretical lenses (Glasser's Choice Theory and Bass's Transformational Leadership), and relevant literature to clarify the theory–practice mismatch.

4.3 Directives of School Rules and Regulations

Quantitative survey data indicated that clear rules and regulations are among the most widely implemented proactive discipline strategies in Malawian secondary schools. A substantial majority of respondents agree with their implementation (88.9% positive endorsement). This high level of reported use was consistent across school types, with no statistically significant difference between boarding schools. These findings suggest that the presence of formal directives is near universal and constitutes a core element of schools' strategy for discipline management. However, the qualitative results revealed a substantial gap in depth and quality of implementation. Schools routinely distribute codes of conduct upon enrollment, but these documents often serve more as administrative or procedural tools than genuinely proactive ones for learner behavioural development. Learners frequently receive these documents upon enrollment with little explanation or ongoing engagement. A dismissed learner recounted:

"I signed a form of school rules when I first joined the school, but honestly, I did not understand some of them. We were just given the form, and it was never discussed again until I was dismissed." (D/L2; 30/04/25)

Head teachers echoed this procedural orientation, with one noting,

"Every learner is given a copy of the school code of conduct. We use it to remind them of the standards expected, and it becomes a reference point when making disciplinary decisions." (H/T2, 06/05/2025)



This strategy reflects a common tendency in many African school contexts where rules exist on paper and are applied reactively but lack the collaborative processes needed to foster genuine understanding and ownership (Gagnon, Sylvester & Marsh, 2021; Harber & Mncube, 2017). From Glasser's Choice Theory (1998) perspective, rules that are merely distributed and enforced without meaningful dialogue fail to satisfy learners' fundamental needs for belonging and power/agency. Learners may exhibit surface-level compliance to avoid sanctions, but they are unlikely to internalise the underlying values or develop self-regulation. This dynamic aligns with Skiba et al.'s (2014) notion of "compliance without comprehension," where schools meet formal requirements but fall short of the substantive behavioural change that proactive discipline aims to achieve. Similarly, Gagnon et al. (2021) found that existing behavioural directives in a disadvantaged South African school were poorly aligned with Positive Behavioural Interventions and Supports (PBIS) principles, remaining predominantly top-down and authoritarian rather than participatory and supportive.

The extensive set of clear rules documented in this study, therefore, addresses important limitations in their nature and effectiveness. Several interconnected barriers contribute to this mismatch, such as large class sizes that limit opportunities for discussion and clarification and insufficient teacher training in facilitative rather than purely directive approaches (Mbilinyi, 2024). There are also cultural norms that continue to equate strong leadership with authoritative rule enforcement and a lack of transformational leadership capable of driving a shift toward more collaborative, needs-satisfying practices (Bass, 1999). This reveals that, while rules are quantitatively dominant, their proactive or preventive potential remains unrealised, contributing to a persistent reactive discipline-management strategy.

Although directives such as clear school rules and regulations are among the most widely adopted proactive strategies in Malawian secondary schools, their implementation remains largely superficial. This gap between widespread presence (theory/policy) and limited developmental impact (practice) underscores a key challenge in proactive learner discipline management. Addressing it will require moving beyond the mere distribution of codes of conduct toward processes that promote shared understanding, learner voice, and alignment with learners' psychological needs, thereby realising the full proactive potential of these directives.

4.4 Advisory Services of Guidance & Counselling

Survey respondents largely endorsed guidance and counselling (approximately 77.9% agreement), with comparable implementation across school types (boarding $M=4.01$; day $M=3.84$; $p=0.106$). The qualitative data, however, uncovered profound constraints. Participants consistently recognised its importance as a supportive strategy to managing learner behaviour, but many also expressed frustration that implementing it effectively was often difficult within existing school conditions. As a result, while the idea of guidance and counselling is broadly supported in principle, its practical application in schools remains limited and frequently compromised. One head teacher explained,

"The problem we have is most schools don't have a professional counsellor; we depend on class teachers to guide learners, but some class teachers themselves need guidance... as a result, we fail to provide this service effectively" (H/T4, 28/05/2025).

Where it was available, guidance and counselling proved impactful, as one learner shared:

"I was emotionally affected, but when the counsellor talked to me, I felt someone understood me. Even though I was suspended, I was able to accept it since the deputy knew the reason that made me steal." (S/L2, 26/05/2025).

The ineffectiveness of implementing guidance and counselling services in secondary schools, however, reveals a reactive rather than a proactive orientation, driven by shortages of trained professionals, heavy workloads, and inadequate infrastructure. Although participants broadly recognised the importance of guidance and counselling for addressing underlying emotional, social, and behavioural issues, its actual delivery remained limited, inconsistent, and predominantly reactive, implemented after incidents of misconduct rather than as a proactive measure. The reactive orientation observed in this study is consistent with broader patterns in resource-constrained African education systems. Guidance and counselling services are frequently mobilised only in response to behavioural problems due to severe shortages of trained professionals, heavy workloads on class teachers, and the absence of dedicated time, space, or infrastructure (Warui, 2018). In many cases, counselling is handled informally by class teachers or deputy head teachers after misconduct has occurred, rather than through structured, proactive programmes aimed at prevention (Salgong et al., 2016).

This situation reflects what Mbilinyi (2024) describes as role conflict, in which class teachers are expected to serve both as evaluators and counsellors. These dual responsibilities create power dynamics that are often incompatible with the trust and openness required for effective counselling. From the perspective of Glasser's Choice Theory (1998), meaningful engagement becomes difficult when learners' sense of safety is undermined by the merging of evaluative authority with roles that should provide confidential support. In such circumstances, learners may hesitate to engage honestly with counselling processes. The mismatch, therefore, is largely structural. Although schools formally recognise



the value of counselling, they often lack the professional infrastructure needed to support it effectively. This finding extends the work of Namphande (2021) by suggesting that the challenge is not only a matter of limited resources but also one of fundamental role incompatibility within existing school systems.

While guidance and counselling is widely recognised as a valuable proactive discipline strategy, its potential remains underutilised. Bridging the gap between their intended purpose and actual practice is essential for strengthening proactive discipline management and institutional support systems that foster positive learner behaviour and well-being in secondary schools.

4.5 Supportive Services and Academic Engagement

4.5.1. Supervised Study Circles

Supervised study circles emerged as an important preventive support strategy in secondary schools. Although 78.3% of participants reported having study circles, their effectiveness depended largely on the quality and consistency of teacher supervision. Participants indicated that when teachers actively guided study circles, learners remained focused on academic tasks and demonstrated responsible behaviour. However, in the absence of supervision, study circles often became informal social gatherings with limited academic or disciplinary value. As one participant observed:

“Study circles are a very good strategy when supervised by teachers. But the problem is that teachers leave students alone, and learners fail to remain focused.” (H/T3, 23/05/2025).

“We have study circles, but most times teachers aren't with us, and we just end up sharing stories.” (S/L1, 13/05/2025).

These findings highlight the critical role of teachers as facilitators of both learning and behavioural development. Within the trauma-informed schooling framework, supportive adult relationships provide learners with structure, accountability, and a sense of belonging, which are essential for positive behavioural outcomes (Brunzell et al., 2018). Without such support, opportunities to foster self-regulation and constructive peer interactions may be diminished. The findings further demonstrate that the mere existence of a disciplinary intervention does not guarantee its effectiveness. Simonsen & Sugai (2020) argue that preventive management strategies often fail when they are implemented without the core components required for success. The present study demonstrates that while study circles are widely established in schools, they are not always adequately supported, creating a gap between policy intentions and actual outcomes.

These findings are consistent with Mgungwe (2023), who found that study circles contribute positively to learner discipline only when adequately supervised. They also align with Positive Behavioural Interventions and Supports (PBIS) literature, which emphasises the importance of consistent implementation and adult support in proactive interventions (Horner et al., 2010). The findings, therefore, suggest that discipline challenges may arise not from the absence of preventive programmes but from weaknesses in their implementation. In many Malawian secondary schools, interventions appear to be institutionally established but insufficiently supported, thereby limiting their capacity to function as effective preventive discipline management strategies. Strengthening supervision structures, therefore, may enhance the capacity of study circles to function as meaningful proactive mechanisms for promoting positive learner behaviour.

4.5.2. Learners' Participation

Learner participation emerged as a valuable yet underutilised proactive discipline strategy. While educational managers generally acknowledged the importance of involving learners in school decision-making, only 43.4% reported implementing participatory practices. Participants shared experiences demonstrating the benefits of learner involvement. One school manager noted that a learner riot followed the withdrawal of entertainment activities without consultation, suggesting that the situation might have been avoided had learners been involved in the decision-making process. Another head teacher reported that assigning responsibilities to learners previously regarded as troublesome resulted in noticeable improvements in both individual and class behaviour.

“I assigned responsibilities to the naughtiest learners. These responsibilities helped transform them and even influenced the behaviour of the entire class” (H/T5, 29/05/2025).

These findings highlight the important role that learner participation plays in fostering responsibility, ownership, and commitment to school rules. Choice Theory posits that learners are more likely to cooperate when they feel respected, valued, and included in decisions affecting their lives (Glasser, 1998). Providing opportunities for learner voice enables learners to develop a sense of belonging and responsibility, reducing the likelihood of resistance and disruptive behaviour. Similarly, Transformative Learning Theory suggests that meaningful participation encourages



reflection, personal growth, and the development of more constructive ways of thinking and behaving (Mezirow, 1997). From the perspective of Dreikurs (1998), excluding learners from decision-making processes often provokes mistaken power-seeking behaviours that manifest through resistance or rebellion dynamics that closely resemble the riots described by participants. Despite widespread recognition of its benefits, learner participation remained limited in practice. This suggests that barriers extend beyond resource constraints and may be linked to longstanding cultural norms regarding authority and decision-making within schools. Harbe and Mncube (2017) argue that many African education systems continue to reflect hierarchical traditions that place decision-making power primarily in the hands of adults. Such traditions may make it difficult for schools to fully embrace participatory strategies, even when educators recognise their value.

The findings, therefore, suggest that promoting learner participation requires more than policy directives. It demands a deliberate shift towards inclusive school cultures where learners are viewed as active partners in promoting positive behaviour. Such an approach may strengthen learners' sense of ownership and contribute to more sustainable discipline outcomes.

4.5.3. Positive Reinforcement

Positive reinforcement revealed one of the most significant gaps between educators' understanding of proactive discipline and its implementation in practice. Both learners and educators strongly agreed that recognising positive behaviour encourages desirable conduct and motivates learners to make responsible choices. As one learner explained,

"When the teacher praises me for doing something right, I feel motivated to behave better.
(D/L2, 16/05/2025)"

Another learner similarly observed,

"Sometimes we only hear about what we did wrong without recognising the good things we do. Positive comments make us feel valued." (D/L1; 23/5/2025)

These responses demonstrate the importance of recognition in shaping learner behaviour and promoting positive relationships within schools. From the perspective of Choice Theory, learners are more likely to engage positively when their needs for belonging, recognition, and achievement are met (Glasser, 1998). Positive reinforcement communicates appreciation and respect, helping learners develop a stronger sense of connection to the school community. In addition, Transformative Learning Theory suggests that positive feedback can encourage learners to reflect on their behaviour and adopt more constructive patterns of engagement (Mezirow, 1997).

Despite the acknowledged benefits of positive reinforcement, participants reported that its implementation was often inconsistent. Although many schools had mechanisms for recognising good behaviour, these were often constrained by financial limitations and not applied consistently throughout the school year. In many cases, recognition occurred only during special events, reducing opportunities to reinforce positive behaviour regularly.

These findings are consistent with Positive Behavioural Interventions and Supports (PBIS) literature, which identifies positive reinforcement as a central component of effective proactive discipline systems (Horner et al., 2010; Sugai & Horner, 2020). Research consistently shows that learners are more likely to repeat desirable behaviours when these behaviours are recognised and rewarded. The findings therefore suggest that the challenge in many Malawian secondary schools is not a lack of appreciation for positive reinforcement, but rather limited institutional capacity and resources to consistently implement it. Strengthening recognition systems may therefore enhance the effectiveness of proactive discipline management and improve learner behaviour outcomes.

4.6 The Theory-Practice Mismatch in Proactive Discipline Management

The central finding of this study is that secondary schools in Malawi demonstrate considerable awareness of the importance of proactive discipline management strategies, even if significant challenges remain in translating this understanding into consistent practice. Although educators generally support proactive strategies such as counselling services, learner participation, supervised learner engagement, positive reinforcement, and clearly communicated school rules, their implementation is often inconsistent. This creates a gap between what schools endorse in principle and what is achieved in practice.

At the conceptual level, proactive discipline management strategy is frequently viewed in terms of compliance with rules and regulations rather than as a broader process that promotes learners' understanding, ownership, and internalisation of positive behaviour. Consistent with Choice Theory (Glasser, 1998), effective discipline requires more than external control; it depends on creating conditions that meet learners' needs for belonging, responsibility, and meaningful engagement. At the structural level, implementation is constrained by limited professional capacity and institutional resources. Shortages of trained guidance and counselling teachers, inadequate supervision of learner-centred initiatives, and insufficient resources to support reinforcement programmes reduce the effectiveness of proactive



discipline interventions. Differences observed between boarding and day schools further suggest that proactive discipline management strategies must be adapted to the realities of different school contexts.

Cultural factors also contribute to the implementation gap. Although learner participation and supportive strategies are widely acknowledged as beneficial, their adoption is often constrained by hierarchical traditions that favour authority-driven discipline strategies. Consequently, participatory strategies may be endorsed in theory but only partially implemented in practice. From the perspective of Positive Behavioural Interventions and Supports (PBIS), these findings suggest that the effectiveness of proactive discipline depends not only on the strategies themselves but also on the quality and consistency of their implementation (Sugai & Horner, 2020; Simonsen & Sugai, 2020). The study therefore concludes that while proactive discipline is widely recognised in Malawian secondary schools, it remains more aspirational than operational due to conceptual, structural, and cultural barriers that continue to limit its effective implementation.

V. CONCLUSION & RECOMMENDATIONS

5.1 Conclusion

This study established that although proactive discipline management strategies are widely recognised and valued in Malawian secondary schools, their implementation remains inconsistent. Strategies such as guidance and counselling services, learner participation in decision-making, supervised learner engagement activities, positive reinforcement, and clearly communicated school rules are generally acknowledged as important for promoting positive learner behaviour. However, limitations in professional support, resource availability, and school culture continue to constrain their effective application. As a result, proactive discipline management remains more aspirational than operational in many secondary schools. The study, therefore, concludes that while proactive approaches offer significant potential to improve learner discipline and foster positive school environments, their success depends on deliberate institutional commitment and sustained support.

5.2 Recommendations

Based on these findings, the study recommends that education authorities, policymakers, and school leaders strengthen the implementation of proactive discipline management strategies by investing in professional support systems, particularly by deploying trained guidance and counselling personnel and providing continuous professional development for educators. Schools should also promote meaningful learner participation in decision-making processes and establish supportive structures that encourage learner responsibility and engagement. Furthermore, policymakers should invest in sustainable, positive-reinforcement programmes and provide adequate resources to support their implementation. Efforts should also focus on cultivating school cultures that embrace collaboration, inclusivity, and shared responsibility for discipline management among educators, learners, parents, and the wider community. Such interventions would help bridge the gap between theory and practice and facilitate the successful implementation of sustainable proactive discipline management strategies in Malawian secondary schools.

Declaration of Interest

The authors declare that they do not have any known competing financial interests or personal relationships that could have appeared to influence the work reported in this paper.

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