

KEMI Journal of Educational Leadership and Management

KJELM

[ISSN 3079-4048]

Volume: 2 Issue: 1 | Jun-2026

Iatrogenic disciplinary effects: How reactive management strategies escalate misconduct in Malawian secondary schools

Wezzie Memory Mtika[1], **Gift Masaiti**[2], **Kapambwe Mwelwa**[3]

Department of Educational Administration and Policy Studies[1]*, School of Education*[2]*, University of Zambia*[3]*, Lusaka, Zambia*

Corresponding Author Email: wezziememory79@gmail.com

Cite this article in APA

Mtika, W. M., Masaiti, G., & Mwelwa, K. (2026). Iatrogenic disciplinary effects: How reactive management strategies escalate misconduct in Malawian secondary schools. KEMI Journal of Educational Leadership and Management, 2(1). https://doi.org/10.68147/2e46a08d

Copyright: ©2026 by the author(s). Open access under CC BY.

Abstract

Learner discipline remains a critical concern in secondary education because of its influence on school climate, academic achievement, and learner development. Despite policy reforms promoting supportive and restorative approaches, many Malawian secondary schools continue to rely on reactive disciplinary strategies such as corporal punishment, suspension, and expulsion. This study assessed the effectiveness of reactive discipline management strategies in addressing learner misconduct and maintaining conducive learning environments in Malawian secondary schools. An embedded mixed-methods design was employed, combining quantitative survey data from 380 participants with qualitative evidence derived from 12 semi-structured interviews and five critical incident case studies. Quantitative data were analysed using binary logistic regression, while qualitative data were subjected to thematic analysis. Findings revealed widespread reliance on punitive approaches, with physical punishment (84.8%) and suspension (78.4%) being the most frequently used disciplinary strategies. However, logistic regression results indicated no statistically significant relationship between reactive disciplinary strategies and improved learner behaviour ($p > .05$). Qualitative findings further demonstrated that punitive interventions often intensified learner resentment, disengagement, and collective resistance. The study introduces the concept of iatrogenic discipline, describing disciplinary interventions that inadvertently produce outcomes contrary to their intended objectives. Additional evidence

revealed contextual blindness, whereby learners were disciplined for behaviours rooted in poverty, family instability, and psychosocial challenges. The study concludes that reactive discipline strategies are ineffective in producing sustainable behavioural change and may contribute to educational exclusion and institutional instability. The study recommends strengthening school-based counselling services, adopting restorative justice approaches, implementing early warning systems, and promoting transformational leadership practices to support inclusive and sustainable learner behaviour management.

Key terms: Iatrogenic discipline, learner misconduct, reactive discipline, restorative justice, school leadership, Malawi

1. Introduction

1.1 Background of the study

Managing learner discipline in remains a persistent global challenge that significantly impacts school administrators, teachers, parents, and students in both developed and developing countries. This issue often hampers effective teaching and learning (Simonsen & Sugai, 2019). Research shows that many school administrators lack the necessary skills to effectively manage learner discipline, which frequently results in decisions that worsen rather than resolve indiscipline (Mwaniki, 2018). Conversely, Mishra & Mehta (2017) argue that secondary learners' misbehaviour is becoming increasingly complex due to modern influences such as media exposure, making it harder for school administrators to maintain order. Despite these challenges, secondary education is increasingly recognised worldwide not only as a pathway to academic achievement but also as a vital environment for cultivating socially responsible and emotionally grounded citizens (UNESCO, 2023). Schools serve as crucial developmental settings where adolescents internalise democratic values, gain self-regulation skills, and develop the principles needed for positive civic participation. The effectiveness of secondary schools in fulfilling this transformative role largely depends on the discipline-management strategies educators use. These strategies can either support or hinder secondary learners' potential to become agents of positive social change.

This perspective aligns with Malawi's national development agenda articulated in Malawi Vision 2063. The strategy identifies human capital development as a central enabler, recognising quality education as fundamental to building an inclusively wealthy and self-reliant nation (Republic of Malawi National Planning, 2021). Achieving this vision requires developing citizens who are not only academically competent but also disciplined, innovative, and socially responsible. In this regard, education is expected to nurture cognitive abilities alongside emotional intelligence and ethical social competencies necessary for national transformation. Meaningful human capital development, however, depends on sustained access to education and stable learning environments in which learners can remain engaged and make productive use of their time in school. When learners are systematically excluded from educational spaces through suspensions and expulsions, the very foundation of human capital formation collapses. A learner who is excluded from school represents not merely an individual educational casualty but a direct subtraction from the nation's developmental potential, whose trajectory is disrupted before it begins.

Similarly, Sustainable Development Goal 4 calls for inclusive, equitable, quality education that promotes lifelong learning, emphasising safe, non-violent learning environments that support holistic development (United Nations, 2015). Yet Malawian secondary schools remain dominated by reactive, punitive responses such as physical punishment, suspension, and expulsion, rooted in colonial authoritarian traditions (Salanjira, 2021). While often reactive management strategies are perceived as expedient

order restoration, these strategies produce temporary compliance through fear rather than fostering self-discipline, which is essential for democratic citizenship, fundamentally misaligning disciplinary practice with developmental purpose.

International evidence suggests that reactive, punitive management strategies to discipline often produce only short-term compliance, failing to achieve lasting behavioural change. Instead, such strategies may lead to recurring misconduct, resentment, and learner disengagement (Skiba et al., 2014). These effects tend to be particularly pronounced among marginalised learners who are already navigating challenges associated with trauma, poverty, or unstable social environments (Gregory et al., 2017). In the Malawian context, many learners face similar pressures, including economic hardship, family instability, and unmet psychosocial needs (Musaiwa, 2022). Under such conditions, reliance on reactive disciplinary strategies may further heighten learners' vulnerability rather than support meaningful behavioural improvement. Emerging evidence also points to troubling experiences among suspended learners, who often describe feelings of humiliation and institutional betrayal, responses that can intensify resentment and encourage further defiance instead of genuine behavioural reform (Zimpita & Sadalaki, 2025). Rather than promoting reflection and accountability, employing reactive disciplinary measures may therefore unintentionally reinforce learners' disengagement from school structures.

In Malawi, studies have consistently documented persistent learner indiscipline, manifested in vandalism, classroom disruptions, and expulsions, posing significant challenges to the education system (Zimpita & Sadalaki, 2025; Ministry of Education, Malawi, 2023). These trends stand in contrast to the provisions of the Malawi Education Act, which call for progressive disciplinary practices that prohibit corporal punishment and promote guidance, counselling, and restorative approaches. At the same time, the realisation of Malawi Vision 2063 depends heavily on the development of a resilient, disciplined, and productive human capital base. Achieving this vision requires a shift within the secondary school sub-sector from predominantly punitive, reactive models of discipline to more proactive, supportive approaches. While MW2063 anticipates the emergence of a productive, socio-economically stable youth population, persistent learner misconduct remains a significant barrier to this aspiration.

1.2. Statement of the problem

Despite growing recognition of the limitations of punitive disciplinary practices, reactive discipline strategies such as corporal punishment, suspension, and expulsion remain widely used in Malawian secondary schools. Existing studies largely document the prevalence of these measures but provide limited evidence regarding their effectiveness in promoting sustainable behavioural change. Consequently, there remains insufficient empirical understanding of whether these disciplinary approaches improve learner behaviour or inadvertently contribute to further misconduct, school disengagement, and educational exclusion. This evidence gap limits the development of effective discipline policies aligned with Sustainable Development Goal 4, the Malawi Education Act (2014), and the aspirations of Malawi Vision 2063. This study therefore investigated the effectiveness of reactive discipline management strategies and their influence on learner behaviour and school climate in Malawian secondary schools.

1.3. Research Objective

To assess the effectiveness of current reactive discipline management strategies used in addressing learner behaviour and maintaining a conducive environmentin Malawian secondary schools.

2. Literature Review

2.1 Theoretical Frameworks

This study is built on Transformational Leadership Theory(Bass & Riggio, 2006) and Glasser's Choice Theory (1998). Understanding the effectiveness of school discipline requires theoretical frameworks that explain not only how individual learners change their behaviour, but also how school leadership and organisational culture shape those changes. Disciplinary outcomes are influenced by both personal experiences and the broader institutional environment in which they occur.In Transformational Leadership Theory, Bass & Riggio (2006) argue that sustainable change within institutions emerges when leaders exercise moral influence, show genuine concern for individual needs, and inspire a shared vision among members of the organisation. In this view, leadership is not rooted in fear or coercion but in trust, respect, and collective purpose, an orientation that stands in clear contrast to disciplinary approaches grounded in control and punishment.

Choice Theory complements this perspective (Glasser, 1998), which argues that lasting behavioural change occurs only when individuals' basic needs, survival, belonging, power, freedom, and fun, are respected, rather than suppressed through punishment. It is further reinforced by Positive Behavioural Interventions and Supports (Sugai & Horner, 2009), which emphasise proactive, data-informed support and recognise that misbehaviour often signals unmet psychosocial needs.

Together, these frameworks guided the study by providing a lens for evaluating whether the reactive discipline strategies commonly used in Malawian secondary schools, such as corporal punishment, suspension, and expulsion, effectively support positive behavioural change and a conducive learning environment. They also provided an interpretation of the findings, highlighting how leadership practices, school climate, and attention to learners' underlying needs influence disciplinary outcomes. Through this lens, the study assessed whether current disciplinary practices align with principles of supportive behaviour change or whether they undermine the goal of creating safe and inclusive school environments.

2.2 Empirical evidence

2.2.1 Prevalence of Reactive Discipline Management Strategies

Reactive disciplinary strategies, including physical punishment, suspension, and expulsion, continue to be widely used in Malawi and several neighbouring contexts despite policy commitments to discourage violent disciplinary practices (Sibanda & Mpofu, 2017; Namphande, 2021). In many schools, gaps in policy enforcement, together with limited access to counselling and psychosocial support services, contribute to the continued reliance on exclusionary sanctions (Namphande, 2021). Research suggests that while such measures may produce immediate compliance, they rarely lead to lasting behavioural change. Instead, they often fail to support the internalisation of moral values, which contributes to repeated misconduct. Empirical evidence links reactive disciplinary approaches to a range of negative educational outcomes, including lower academic achievement, increased truancy, and higher school dropout rates (Skiba et al., 2014; Gregory et al., 2017). When applied without structured remediation or supportive interventions, suspension and expulsion can further compound educational disadvantage rather than addressing the underlying causes of learner misbehaviour.

Across sub-Saharan Africa, adherence to traditional and authoritarian disciplinary models persists even in contexts where legislative reforms have been introduced (Makendano & Mahlangu, 2023). This pattern

aligns with broader regional trends identified by Sibanda &Mpofu (2017), who describe reactive discipline as the dominant operational approach in many schools across the region. In Malawi, similar patterns have been documented. Although educators frequently acknowledge the limited effectiveness of punitive approaches, such measures continue to be widely used in everyday school practice (Dembo, 2024; Mwale, 2020).

The persistence of these practices, despite explicit legal prohibitions under Article 19 of the Constitution of Malawi and provisions within the Education Act (2014), suggests that the issue extends beyond simple policy non-compliance. Rather, the continued reliance on punishment reflects a deeply embedded cultural logic within schooling systems. In many contexts, disciplinary practices remain influenced by a long-standing belief that pain or hardship is necessary for learning. This assumption that learners change for the better when subjected to pain operates as an unwritten policy that shapes everyday classroom practice (Han, 2017; Gebrezgabihera & Hailu, 2017). Consequently, efforts to reform discipline practices require not only policy changes but also deeper shifts in institutional culture and educational beliefs.

2.2.2. Mechanism Linking Reactive Discipline to Negative Behavioural Outcome

Research identifies several mechanisms by which reactive disciplinary strategies can cause unintended harm. Punitive sanctions may undermine trust between teachers and learners. Experiences of punishment, particularly when perceived as harsh or humiliating, can provoke feelings of anger, resentment, or withdrawal among learners, especially those already facing poverty or trauma (Gershoff & Grogan-Kaylor, 2016; Dembo, 2024). In line with this, Larson's (2022) analysis of criminal justice sanctions shows that some forms of punishment, particularly combinations of probation and monetary penalties, can be criminogenic, producing weak deterrent effects and, in some cases, reinforcing cycles of offending rather than disrupting them.

Exclusionary measures such as suspension and expulsion often leave learners unsupervised for extended periods. This absence of structured engagement can create opportunities for negative peer associations, increasing the likelihood of repeated misconduct and, in some cases, escalating into collective resistance or school unrest (Musaiwa, 2022; Stitt, 2023). Further, studies reveal that sometimes educators respond to behavioural violations without considering the learner's socioeconomic background. The broader socioeconomic or psychological circumstances surrounding learners may sometimes influence learner behaviour outcomes. Educators need to understand these circumstances before reacting to learners' indiscipline. When misconduct rooted in poverty, trauma, or family instability is treated purely as rule-breaking, disciplinary responses may fail to address its underlying causes (Zimpita & Sadalaki, 2025). These dynamics, therefore, suggest that reactive disciplinary measures, although often intended to restore order, can inadvertently contribute to deeper behavioural problems and institutional instability.

The reviewed literature indicates a growing consensus that reactive disciplinary practices often fail to produce lasting behavioural change and may generate unintended negative consequences for learners. While international research increasingly supports preventive and supportive approaches that address the underlying causes of misconduct, evidence from Malawi and much of sub-Saharan Africa shows that schools still rely heavily on punitive strategies. This reveals a persistent gap between policy intentions, theoretical guidance, and the realities of school discipline. Guided by this gap, the present study provides empirical evidence on the effectiveness of current reactive disciplinary strategies in Malawian secondary schools and examines their actual influence on learner behaviour and the school learning environment.

3. METHODOLOGY

3.1 Research Design

An embedded mixed-methods design (Creswell & Plano Clark, 2018) was employed, in which quantitative data served as the primary component and qualitative data provided explanatory depth regarding mechanisms and contextual factors. This design was selected because quantitative analysis could establish prevalence and statistical associations across a large sample. Qualitative data, on the other hand, complemented these results by supplying narrative depth, participant experiences, and explanatory insights that enriched the understanding of the statistical patterns. Integrating the two data sets enabled triangulation of quantitative findings with rich qualitative evidence drawn from interviews, documents, and case studies.

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 approaches and the need for more preventive 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 socioeconomic conditions but also provided meaningful insights into the implementation of preventive discipline in environments where challenges posed by learner misconduct are particularly pronounced.

3.3 Target Population

The study's target population comprised educational administrators, the school management team, student council leaders, and the dismissed/suspended learners. The total population (N) of 7518 (EMIS Report, 2023) from two education divisions in Malawi and the sample were calculated using Yamane's formula, yielding a total of 380 participants.

3.2 Sampling and Participants

Quantitative data was gathered from 380 participants, including members of school management teams and student councils. Qualitative data were collected through 12 in-depth interviews with Education Division Managers, head teachers, and learners who had been dismissed or suspended due to exclusionary discipline. Additionally, critical incidents of severe indiscipline, defined as events leading to student suspension, property damage, or school closures, were selected based on the severity of the incident and the availability of documentary evidence.

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 and case reports. 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.

3.3 Data Analysis

Quantitative data were analysed using descriptive statistics to determine the frequency of four key reactive discipline management strategies (verbal warnings, physical punishment, suspension, expulsion). Binary logistic regression was used to model the relationship between each reactive strategy and the likelihood of improved learner behavior, while controlling for confounding variables. Qualitative data were analysed thematically to identify emerging themes regarding the perceived effectiveness and impact of reactive discipline management strategies.Furthermore, the analysis of case study data focused on identifying triggers of indiscipline, institutional responses, learner reactions, and the outcomes of reactive discipline strategies.

3.4 Validity, Reliability, and Trustworthiness

The study ensured methodological rigor by establishing the validity and reliability of quantitative instruments through expert validation and pilot testing. Trustworthiness of the qualitative data was enhanced through triangulation, member checking, and audit trail procedures, thereby strengthening the credibility, dependability, confirmability, and transferability of the findings.

4. RESULTS

4.1 Frequency and Perceived Effectiveness of Reactive Discipline Strategies

In this research paper, the independent variable was the type of reactive disciplinary management strategy, categorised into verbal warning, physical punishment, suspension, and expulsion. The dependent variables were the perceived frequency of use of these strategies in secondary schools and the perceived extent to which they improve learner behaviour. Figure 1 presents participants' level of agreement.

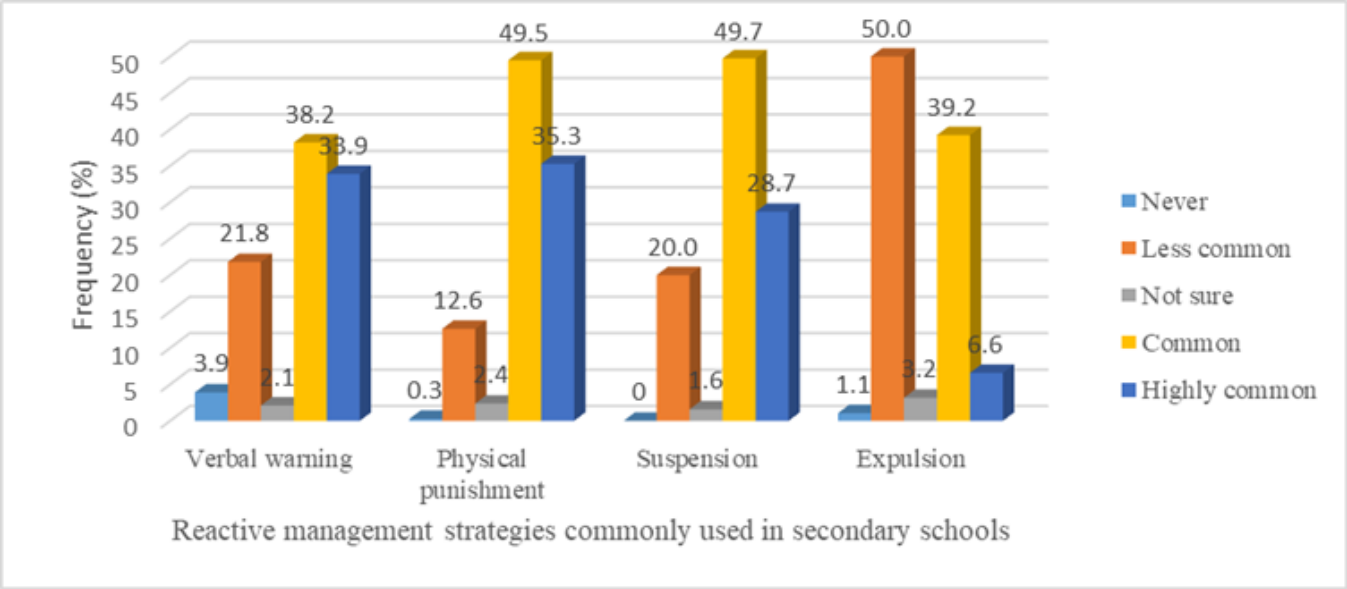


Figure 1*: Descriptive Statistics results*

The study confirmed widespread reliance on reactive management strategies: physical punishment (84.8%) and suspension (78.4%) were the most frequently reported.

4.2 Association between Reactive Strategies and Improved Learner

Binary logistic regression analysis provided strong evidence on the efficacy of these reactive discipline strategies in improving learner discipline. Table 1 presents regression results.

Table 1

Binary Logistics Regression Results

Reactive Strategy	B	S.E.	Wald	Df	Sig.	Exp(B)
Verbal Warning	0.084	0.088	0.921	1	0.337	**1.088**
Physical Punishment	0.015	0.086	0.030	1	0.863	**1.015**
Suspension	-0.029	0.103	0.080	1	0.777	0.971
Expulsion	-0.035	0.102	0.120	1	0.730	0.965

The analysis revealed that all four common reactive discipline management strategies showed weak, statistically insignificant relationships with improved learner behaviour ($P > 0.05$). While a verbal warning had the highest odds ratio (Exp (B) = 1.088), its effect remained minimal and non-significant, indicating only momentary order without meaningful long-term behavioural change. Physical punishment demonstrated a negligible practical effect (Exp(B) = 1.015), with the 1.5% increase in likelihood too small to be educationally relevant. Suspension (Exp(B) = 0.971) and expulsion (Exp(B) = 0.965) showed slight negative associations, suggesting limited value in promoting sustainable discipline outcomes.

Conclusion: Reactive strategies do not meaningfully improve learner behaviour

4.3 Qualitative Results

Qualitative analysis from semi-structured interviews and case study incidences revealed four critical themes: punitive measure dominance, reflecting entrenched institutional reliance on punishment;iatrogenic effect, a borrowed medical term wherein, in this context, punitive measures escalated rather than remediated misconduct; education deprivation, whereby exclusionary practices severed educational trajectories; and contextual blindness, wherein punitive measures ignored socioeconomic realities such as poverty, child-headed households, and emotional neglect.

Table 2: Summary of Common Reactive management used and its Effectiveness and Emerging Themes.

Table 2

Summary of Qualitative Themes on Reactive Discipline Practices

Emerging Theme	Key concepts	Representative Verbatim

Punitive Measures dominance	Physical punishment, suspension, expulsion	*"Some offenses attract internal measures like physical punishments, but some are suspended from school for 6 weeks, and in extreme cases, a learner can be dismissed. But out of these strategies, punishment is the quickest way to control learner misbehavior, and we are used to it". (H/T3)*
Education Deprivation	School dropout, disempowerment, suppression, infringement,	*"Exclusion. You are sort of denying a chance of learning to the learner. Yet, our job is to bring all learners on board and reform them." H/T1*
Contextual Blindness	Emotional neglect, poverty, broken families	*Some learners come from broken families where they face neglect. When we punish them without understanding their situation, we only make things worse." E/M2*

Source: Field Data, 2025

4.4 Study Limitations

This study faced several limitations. First, the research was conducted in only two education divisions in Malawi, which may limit the generalisability of the findings to all secondary schools in the country. To mitigate this limitation, the study included both boarding and day secondary schools and utilised a relatively large quantitative sample (N = 380).

Second, the study relied partly on self-reported data from school leaders, student leaders, and learners, which may have been affected by social desirability bias. This limitation was addressed through triangulation of questionnaires, interviews, disciplinary records, and critical incident case studies.

Third, the cross-sectional nature of the study limited the ability to establish long-term causal relationships between disciplinary interventions and behavioural outcomes. However, the use of qualitative case studies provided contextual insights into patterns of behavioural escalation and disciplinary effects.

Finally, some suspended and expelled learners were difficult to access because of geographical dispersion and school departure. Purposive sampling and engagement with education authorities helped identify suitable participants and ensure adequate representation of relevant experiences.

5. DISCUSSION

5.1 Dominance of Reactive Punitive Discipline Practices

The findings show that punitive disciplinary practices are still common in Malawian secondary schools. The study revealed that physical punishment was used in 84.8%, supporting earlier regional studies (Sibanda & Mpofu, 2017; Makendana & Mahlangu, 2023). Importantly, the results indicate that this reliance has persisted despite policy and legislative reforms intended to discourage such practices. Binary logistic regression analysis (Table 1) also showed no statistically significant link between reactive

disciplinary strategies and improved learner discipline. This pattern suggests that the continued use of these measures may be more about tradition than effectiveness, a finding consistent with global meta-analytic evidence reported by Gershoff (2017) and other African studies on behavioural outcomes (Belle, 2017).

The widespread yet ineffective use of punitive measures seems to reflect patterns observed across sub-Saharan Africa, where corporal punishment remains culturally accepted despite being prohibited by law. From this study's perspective, the ongoing use of these methods suggests that institutional norms and practical limitations may be maintaining practices that policy changes have already challenged. At the same time, it's important to recognise scholarly views that cautiously support punitive discipline in settings with limited resources. Some researchers argue that moderate corporal punishment can serve as a quick deterrent where counselling and psychosocial support are scarce (; Han, 2017). Likewise, Harber (2021) warns that blindly adopting learner-centred disciplinary models in high-poverty schools may disrupt classroom order, especially where students are socialised to expect firm authority. These perspectives highlight the real challenges teachers face in overcrowded, under-resourced environments. This reality was echoed by a Malawian head teacher, who noted that

“Exclusion is very helpful when a student is not reforming... like a rotten fish removed from a basket, because it can contaminate the others.” (H/T1)

Such perspectives emerge from the lived realities of overcrowded classrooms, under-resourced schools, and emotionally exhausted educators. Similarly, scholars in the United States suggest that strong hierarchical authority, when consistently applied, may offer reassurance by signalling firm boundary enforcement (Stitt, 2023).However, the present study's findings suggest that such justifications may overestimate the effectiveness of punitive discipline. Evidence from multiple case sites shows that, even when schools applied sanctions through formal, transparent procedures, the intended behavioural improvements rarely occurred. Instead, punitive responses often created adversarial relationships between learners and school authorities, leading to resentment, repeated misconduct, and cycles of escalation. This pattern suggests that punitive discipline may address the symptoms of learner misbehaviour while leaving its underlying causes unresolved.

These findings reinforce existing literature, which suggests that coercive disciplinary practices in schools frequently generate anger and resistance rather than genuine self-discipline (Obadire & Sinthumule, 2021). Learners subjected to such sanctions tend to comply only in the presence of authority figures, which limits their ability to develop internal moral responsibility. In this sense, punishment appears to promote rule avoidance rather than ethical understanding.

From an institutional perspective, the dominance of punitive discipline appears to reflect a transactional approach to school leadership in which compliance is maintained through sanctions. In this model, punishment provides school leaders with immediate and visible control, often perceived as a practical solution to disorder. However, such approaches may achieve short-term compliance without fostering the deeper moral understanding necessary for lasting behavioural change.

This pattern contrasts with relational and transformative approaches to discipline that emphasise belonging, shared responsibility, and supportive school climates. In this regard, the findings suggest that punitive disciplinary strategies may inadvertently undermine learners’ sense of inclusion and connection within the school community. By weakening these relational foundations, reactive punitive practices may intensify the very resistance and disengagement they are intended to address. This may indicate that reactive punitive measures are not just ineffective but also a missed opportunity to build trust, as dominance of punitive discipline in schools leaves learners feeling broken and teachers feeling helpless. Therefore, transformational leaders who inspire empathy and invest in supports like counselling are

needed in Malawian secondary schools. This may mean turning education policies into real action, training teachers, and enforcing restorative practices to create schools where learners feel safe and valued, not feared.

5.2 The Iatrogenic Effect of Reactive Discipline

The most striking finding from the case study analysis was that punitive responses did not just fail to correct behaviour but actively catalysed escalation. A review of case studies clearly indicated that reactive punitive discipline measures functioned as an iatrogenic agent, actively producing more severe and organised forms of misconduct. The word iatrogenic is a medical term that describes harm caused by medical treatment itself rather than the underlying conditions (Sharpe & Faden, 1998). Applying this concept to school discipline helps illuminate how certain interventions may inadvertently generate the very behaviours they are intended to prevent.

Across the five cases examined in this study, disciplinary actions such as suspension and expulsion frequently transformed isolated acts of defiance into collective and retaliatory misconduct. In several instances, these responses were followed by organised acts of resistance, including arson and large-scale destruction of school property, often occurring within a short period after the disciplinary decision. From this study's perspective, these patterns suggest that punitive interventions sometimes operate less as corrective mechanisms and more as triggers of escalation, particularly when learners perceive them as unjust or humiliating.

This interpretation aligns with broader scholarship on the unintended consequences of punishment. For example, Larson (2022) demonstrates that, in criminal justice systems, certain sanctions can produce iatrogenic outcomes by reinforcing rather than disrupting pathways to further offending. The patterns observed in the present study appear to reflect a similar dynamic in school contexts, where punitive discipline may inadvertently deepen hostility and collective resistance rather than fostering behavioural reform.

The iatrogenic nature of Malawian school discipline is evidenced by systemic failure to distinguish between compliance and character development, resulting in worsened learner behaviour. As Dembo (2024) clarifies, reliance on reactive strategies is often a default setting born of structural inadequacy; however, as Zimpita & Sadalaki (2025) demonstrate, these interventions often worsen the behaviours they seek to prevent by removing learners from the academic setting. Similarly, Iniobong & Iheakachi (2025) found in their Nigerian study that schools that employ predominantly punitive approaches fare worse than those that use restorative practices. In this context, discipline becomes a pathogen rather than a solution, with administrative responses to disruption serving as the primary catalysts for further institutional instability.

The patterns observed in this study can also be interpreted through the lens of leadership theories. Bass & Riggio’s (2006) transformational leadership framework emphasises moral authority, shared vision, intellectual engagement, and individualised consideration as key foundations for sustainable behavioural change. However, the evidence from the case schools suggests that leadership practices often reflected a more transactional approach centred on control through fear and exclusion. In several instances, reliance on suspension and expulsion appeared to provoke collective resistance rather than compliance. Similar patterns have been documented in Zimbabwean boarding schools, where authoritarian disciplinary practices were found to gradually erode trust between learners and school authorities (Moyo & Ndlovu, 2024). From this study's perspective, such dynamics weaken the perceived legitimacy of school leadership, making disciplinary actions more likely to be interpreted as hostile toward the learner community.

Dreikurs' theory of mistaken goals provides further insight into the psychological processes underlying this escalation. According to this framework, learner misbehaviour often begins as an attempt to assert power within restrictive environments. When such behaviour is met with coercive or humiliating responses, feelings of discouragement may intensify, leading learners to shift their motivations toward retaliation. Evidence from Kenyan schools supports this pattern, showing that public shaming frequently precedes organised acts of defiance (Maitha et al., 2025). Viewed from this perspective, acts such as vandalism or arson can be interpreted not simply as impulsive reactions but as symbolic expressions of perceived injustice. Each punitive escalation therefore reinforces feelings of exclusion and strengthens cycles of retaliation, reducing the likelihood that subsequent disciplinary interventions will restore order.

Nevertheless, it is important to acknowledge that some studies present more nuanced conclusions. Research in Ghana by Dzikunu et al. (2024), for example, found that disciplinary action sometimes prevented the spread of disruptive behaviour when immediately followed by counselling support. This suggests that the harmful effects of punitive discipline may be influenced by broader support structures surrounding disciplinary decisions rather than being inherent to all sanctions. However, the cases examined in the present study indicate that where supportive mechanisms are largely absent and leadership remains predominantly transactional, punishment, suspension, and expulsion may gradually shift from tools of discipline to triggers of collective resistance. Similar observations have been reported by Dlamini (2022), who found that schools with high expulsion rates often experienced increasing levels of violent incidents over time. In such contexts, exclusionary discipline does not appear to restore order; instead, it may unintentionally reproduce the very disruptions it seeks to control.

These findings reveal a deeper human cost and a missed opportunity to cultivate trust in secondary school environments where young people most need guidance and support. The evidence, therefore, calls for a shift beyond reactive, short-term solutions toward approaches grounded in empathy, dialogue, and relational trust as essential foundations for meaningful and lasting behavioural change.

5.3 Contextual Blindness in Disciplinary Practice

The ineffectiveness of reactive strategies is compounded by what this study conceptualises as contextual blindness, the systematic failure of disciplinary frameworks to account for the socioeconomic and psychological realities shaping learner behaviour. Evidence from the study indicates that learners were frequently punished for actions rooted in circumstances such as poverty, emotional neglect, or unstable family environments, conditions largely beyond their control. The tension between rigid disciplinary policy and the lived realities of learners was clearly articulated by one head teacher:

"When you start digging into their background, you realise there is suffering... there is baggage these learners are carrying, and then you ask yourself whether punishment or suspension is really helping." (H/T4)

From this study's perspective, such reflections illustrate the difficulty of applying uniform disciplinary measures to misbehaviours arising from complex personal and social challenges. Similar patterns have been documented in other contexts. For example, research by Uzoechina et al. (2015) in Lagos secondary schools found that a majority of students who received repeated suspensions came from households experiencing food insecurity or parental absence. The authors described punitive responses to such circumstances as a form of "double victimisation," where already vulnerable learners face further exclusion through disciplinary sanctions.

These observations can also be interpreted through the lens of leadership and behavioural theories. Within Bass & Riggio's (2006) transformational leadership framework, the principle of individualised consideration requires leaders to respond to the distinct needs and circumstances of those they guide, in

this case, the learners. The evidence from this study suggests that when disciplinary responses ignore these contextual factors, opportunities for supportive intervention are often missed. A similar perspective is offered by Glasser's Choice Theory, which proposes that behaviours driven by unmet survival needs are unlikely to be corrected through punishment alone. Instead, punitive responses may deepen feelings of alienation and disengagement.

Empirical evidence from the region further supports this interpretation. For instance, studies in South Africa have shown that teachers trained in trauma-informed practices reported fewer disciplinary incidents, suggesting that greater contextual awareness can positively influence behavioural outcomes (Gcelu et al., 2020). From the perspective of this study, these findings highlight the importance of disciplinary approaches that recognise the broader social conditions shaping learner behaviour

At the same time, it is important to acknowledge that contextual blindness may not always stem from educators' indifference. Scholars such as Majani (2020) and Dembo (2024) argue that in resource-constrained environments, punitive discipline often addresses visible symptoms of vulnerability rather than their underlying causes. Supporting this view, Simeo & Tangi (2022) found that some educators struggled to incorporate contextual considerations not because they dismissed learners' difficulties, but because they faced uncertainty about how to balance accountability with compassion while working under heavy workloads and limited institutional support. From this perspective, the persistence of context-insensitive disciplinary practices may reflect broader systemic constraints within schools rather than purely attitudinal shortcomings among educators.

Reflecting on these accounts, the findings reveal not only the hidden struggles of learners but also the difficult decisions educators face, such as the head teacher's. From the researcher's perspective, this suggests that contextual blindness is less a matter of indifference and more a reflection of systemic pressures within secondary schools. It therefore highlights the need for more empathetic and context-sensitive disciplinary strategies that enable schools to support rather than further marginalise vulnerable learners.

5.4 Education Deprivation

The findings of this study indicate that exclusionary reactive discipline strategies, particularly suspension and expulsion, operate less as mechanisms for behavioural correction and more as pathways to education deprivation. Regression results revealed no statistically significant relationship between exclusionary disciplinary practices and sustained behavioural change. When considered alongside qualitative accounts from learners who failed to re-enter the education system after dismissal, the evidence suggests that such measures often sever rather than repair educational trajectories. From the perspective of this study, these patterns point to the emergence of what may be described as a Malawian 'school-to-dropout pipeline' in which disciplinary exclusion gradually removes learners from formal education with limited opportunities for return.

Insights from school leaders themselves further reinforce this interpretation. One head teacher acknowledged that "expulsion is more like we deny learners access to education," a reflection that provides internal confirmation of the exclusionary effects identified in the data. Supporting this observation, Musaiwa (2022) found that learners expelled from schools in rural Malawian districts were significantly less likely to re-enroll in any formal education programme than those who left school for economic reasons. This suggests that expulsion introduces additional barriers beyond administrative removal, including stigma and loss of institutional support. Similarly, Zimpita & Sadalaki (2025) report that many girls suspended from Malawian secondary schools never return to the education system. These findings resonate with broader international research. Hollingsworth et al. (2018), for example, argue that removing learners from school environments eliminates the very protective structures, routine,

supervision, and cognitive engagement that help to address learner behavioural challenges. In such circumstances, exclusionary discipline tends to disproportionately affect learners whose families lack the social capital required to navigate re-entry processes.

Within the Malawian context, the consequences of exclusion are further intensified by systemic rigidity. Evidence from policy analysed by Namphande (2021) indicates that once learners are expelled from government secondary schools, few formal mechanisms exist to facilitate their reintegration. Unlike countries such as Rwanda and Tanzania, where expelled learners may apply for placement in alternative public institutions after completing rehabilitation programmes, Malawi offers limited institutional pathways for return. From this study's perspective, this structural gap renders disciplinary exclusion a paradox: attempts to address misconduct ultimately deny learners access to the very institution responsible for their academic and social development. This interpretation aligns with earlier findings by Skiba et al. (2014) and Majani (2020), who note that exclusionary discipline in many educational contexts functions not as a temporary corrective pause but as a permanent exit point.

The implications of these findings become particularly significant when considered in relation to global and national development priorities. From the standpoint of Sustainable Development Goal 4, which calls for inclusive and equitable quality education, disciplinary practices that permanently remove learners from school directly undermine commitments to educational access and lifelong learning. UNESCO (2021) similarly cautions that education systems relying heavily on exclusionary discipline struggle to meet inclusivity standards, often disproportionately affecting already vulnerable learners. Empirical evidence from Chansa & Phiri (2025) further demonstrates that schools with high expulsion rates tend to perform poorly on indicators of SDG 4 progress.

At the national level, these outcomes also raise concerns for Malawi’s long-term development agenda. Malawi Vision 2063 identifies human capital development as a central driver of national transformation. However, when schools function as exit points rather than developmental spaces, the foundations of this vision are weakened. EMIS reports (2022; 2023) indicate that substantial numbers of learners leave the secondary education system each year due to disciplinary exclusion, representing a significant loss of potential graduates and future contributors to the national economy. From this study's perspective, each expelled learner represents not only an individual educational loss but also a missed opportunity for human capital development. Sustained educational access, meaningful school engagement, and uninterrupted learning environments are essential conditions for building the skills and competencies envisioned in MW2063.

Education deprivation in this context is not simply an unintended consequence of strict disciplinary measures; rather, it appears to be a structural outcome of current practices. The findings suggest that reactive disciplinary strategies often prioritise immediate administrative control over the continuity of learners’ educational journeys, thereby weakening the school’s role as a supportive and corrective institution. Reflecting on the experiences shared by both learners and educators in this study, it becomes evident that such practices carry profound human consequences. Learners risk losing opportunities for personal and academic development, while educators grapple with the limitations of systems that offer few alternatives to exclusion. These patterns highlight the urgent need to reimagine school discipline in ways that preserve access to education and rebuild trust within learning environments. In this sense, schools must move beyond functioning as gatekeepers of exclusion and instead become institutions that safeguard opportunity, supporting learners to grow, recover from mistakes, and realise their full potential.

You also need to highlight the limitation of the study. It is important and demonstrates the mitigating measures you put in place to ensure research credibility.

5.5 Theoretical Implications

The findings challenge assumptions underlying punitive discipline by demonstrating that sanctions do not necessarily generate sustainable behavioural improvement. Instead, the findings provide support for Transformational Leadership Theory, which emphasizes trust, moral influence, individualized consideration, and supportive relationships as drivers of meaningful and lasting behavioural change (Bass & Riggio, 2006). The evidence from this study suggests that disciplinary approaches grounded primarily in punishment and exclusion undermine these leadership principles by weakening trust between learners and school authorities.

Similarly, the findings align with Glasser's Choice Theory, which proposes that lasting behavioural change occurs when learners' psychological and social needs are acknowledged and addressed rather than suppressed through punishment (Glasser, 1998). The emergence of themes such as contextual blindness, education deprivation, and iatrogenic discipline indicates that learner misconduct is often rooted in unmet developmental, emotional, and socioeconomic needs. Consequently, punitive disciplinary practices may fail because they address observable behaviour while neglecting the underlying conditions that contribute to it.

Viewed through these theoretical lenses, learner misconduct should be understood not merely as a violation of school rules but also as a manifestation of broader psychosocial and contextual challenges. Effective discipline therefore requires transformational leadership practices that prioritise empathy, inclusion, restorative engagement, and learner support. Such approaches are more likely to promote self-regulation, positive school climate, and sustainable behavioural change than reactive disciplinary sanctions.

6. Conclusion and Recommendations

This study established that reactive discipline strategies remain dominant in Malawian secondary schools despite growing evidence questioning their effectiveness. Quantitative findings demonstrated that verbal warnings, punishment, suspension, and expulsion have limited influence on sustainable behavioural improvement. Qualitative findings further revealed that punitive responses may trigger unintended negative consequences, including educational exclusion, learner alienation, collective resistance, and escalation of misconduct.

The study contributes to educational leadership literature by introducing the concept of**iatrogenic discipline**, illustrating how disciplinary interventions intended to correct behaviour may inadvertently worsen misconduct. The findings further demonstrate that the effectiveness of discipline management cannot be separated from learners' social, economic, and psychological contexts.

The study concludes that sustainable learner discipline requires a transition from punitive control toward preventive, restorative, and learner-centred approaches that support both behavioural development and educational inclusion.

References

1. Bass, B. M., & Riggio, R. E. (2006). *Transformational leadership* (2nd ed.). Lawrence Erlbaum Associates. https://doi.org/10.4324/9781410617095
2. Belle, L. J. (2017). A critical review of the current education system of Mauritius and the learner discipline problem in Mauritian state secondary schools. *Journal of Education and Social Sciences, 8*(1), 47–55.

3. Chansa, T. C., & Phiri, E. V. (2025). School management practices and students' discipline: A case of selected secondary schools in Lusaka District, Zambia. *International Journal for Social Studies*, *11*(1), 6–24. https://doi.org/10.5281/zenodo.14632079
4. Creswell, J. W., & Plano Clark, V. L. (2018). *Designing and conducting mixed methods research* (3rd ed.). SAGE Publications.
5. Dembo, J. (2024). *Implementation of student discipline policy in public and mission secondary schools: A comparative perspective* [Doctoral dissertation, University of Malawi].
6. Dzikunu, C., Acquah, A., Yelkpieri, D., & Pajibo, E. (2024). Indiscipline in senior high schools in Ghana. *Ghana Journal of Education and Teaching, 14*(1).
7. Gebrezgabiher, G. G., & Hailu, G. K. (2017). A child-rights-based approach to corporal punishment of children in primary schools in the Eastern Zone of the Tigray Region, Ethiopia. *International Journal of Educational Development in Africa, 3*(1), Article 2581.
8. Gcelu, N., Edwards, S., & Habib, A. (2020). Enabling a trauma-informed approach in higher education during the COVID-19 period. *South African Journal of Higher Education, 34*(3), 67–84. https://doi.org/10.20853/34-3-3987
9. Glasser, W. (1998). Choice theory: A new psychology of personal freedom. HarperCollins
10. Han, S. (2017). *Corporal punishment in rural schools: Student problem behaviours, academic outcomes, and school safety efforts*. Springer. https://doi.org/10.1007/978-981-10-2448-1
11. Harber, C. (2021). Everyday schooling: Preserving the status quo or worse? In *Post-Covid schooling* (pp. 5–23). Palgrave Macmillan. https://doi.org/10.1007/978-3-030-87824-5_1
12. Hollingsworth, L., Olsen, D., Asikin-Garmager, A., & Winn, K. M. (2018). Initiating conversations and opening doors: How principals establish a positive building culture to sustain school improvement efforts. Educational Management Administration & Leadership, 46(6), 1014–1034.
13. Iniobong, M. E., & Iheakachi, K. I. (2025). The impact of punishing minor offenses on children and its effect on recidivism rates. *Journal of Leadership and Development, 1*(2), 55–66.
14. Larson, R. P. (2022). *The iatrogenic effects of punishment* [Doctoral dissertation, University of Minnesota]. University of Minnesota Digital Conservancy. https://hdl.handle.net/11299/243159
15. Maitha, B. K., Mwania, P., & Mumo, R. (2025). The role of students council in curbing indiscipline in secondary schools in Kangundo Sub-County, Machakos County, Kenya. *Journal of Popular Education in Africa, 9*(10), 465–479.
16. Majani, W. P. (2020). Student-teachers' experiences and strategies of managing disruptive behaviours in Tanzania secondary schools. *AJOTE, 9*, 152–174.
17. Makendano, A. K., & Mahlangu, V. P. (2023). Imagined strategies in managing learner behaviour in schools. *International Journal of Scholars in Education, 6*(1), 112–129.
18. Masilo, D. T. (2022). Social work intervention to address the phenomenon of bullying amongst learners in the school setting: A literature review. *South African Journal of Education, 38*(4).
19. Ministry of Education Science & Technology. (2023). *EMIS report*. Lilongwe.
20. Mishra, P., & Mehta, R. (2017). What educators get wrong about 21st-century learning. Journal of Digital Learning in Teacher Education, 33(1), 6–19.
21. Moyo, N., & Ndlovu, S. (2024). Transformational leadership and its impact on student discipline in Zimbabwean secondary schools: A qualitative study. *South African Journal of Education, 44*(1), 1–12. https://doi.org/10.15700/saje.v44n1a2345

22. Musaiwa, C. D. J. (2022). *Influence of head teachers' leadership styles on student discipline in public secondary schools in Mulanje District, Malawi* [Doctoral dissertation, Catholic University of Eastern Africa].
23. Mwaniki, S. G. (2018). Students' indiscipline: A reflection on the causes of misbehavior among learners in Kenyan secondary schools. Global Journal of Advanced Research, 5(4), 171-177
24. Namphande, P. N. (2021). Human rights and school discipline in Malawi. *Inkanyiso, 13*(2), 167–180.
25. Obadire, O. T., & Sinthumule, D. A. (2021). Learner discipline in the post-corporal punishment era. *South African Journal of Education, 41*(2).
26. Republic of Malawi. (2014). *Education Act of Malawi*. Government Press.
27. Republic of Malawi. (2021). *Malawi Vision 2063*. National Planning Commission.
28. Salanjira, M. (2021). History of ethics in Malawi's education system: 1875–2019. In *Ethics in Malawi* (p. 131).
29. Sharpe, V. A., & Faden, A. I. (1998). *Medical harm: Historical, conceptual, and ethical dimensions of iatrogenic illness*. Cambridge University Press.
30. Sibanda, L., & Mpofu, M. (2017). Positive discipline practices in schools. *Journal of Educational and Social Research*, *7*(3).
31. Simeo, R., & Tangi, F. (2022). Strategies used by heads of secondary schools in managing students' discipline for academic achievement in Ilemela District, Mwanza, Tanzania. *International Journal of Humanities and Education Development (IJHED), 4*(2), 45–52.
32. Stitt, M. E. (2023). "Broken windows" discipline and racial disparities in school punishment. *Punishment & Society, 25*(1), 241–263.
33. Simonsen, B., & Sugai, G. (2019). School-wide positive behavioral interventions and supports: A systems-level application of behavioral principles. In S. G. Little & A. Akin-Little (Eds.), *Behavioral interventions in schools: Evidence-based positive strategies* (2nd ed., pp. 35–60). American Psychological Association. https://doi.org/10.1037/0000126-003
34. Sugai, G., & Horner, R. (2014). The evolution of discipline practices: school-wide positive behaviour supports. In *Behaviour Psychology in the Schools* (pp. 23–50). Routledge.
35. UNESCO. (2015). *Education for All global monitoring report: Education for All 2000–2015: Achievements and challenges*. UNESCO Publishing.
36. UNESCO. (2023). *Learner discipline and safe learning environments: A framework for inclusive schools*. UNESCO Publishing.
37. United Nations. (2015). *Sustainable Development Goal 4*. UN Publications.
38. Uzoechina, G. O., Oguegbu, A., Akintola, A., & Ogundele, M. O. (2015). Home background variables and girl-child pregnancy among students in secondary schools in Uyo, Nigeria. *Mediterranean Journal of Social Sciences, 6*(4 S3), 227–233. https://doi.org/10.5901/mjss.2015.v6n4s3p227
39. Zimpita, V. T., & Sadalaki, J. (2025). Understanding conflict in secondary schools in Malawi: A reflection on causes and effects. *International Journal of Research Publication and Reviews, 6*(7), 2128–2139. https://ijrpr.com/uploads/V6ISSUE7/IJRPR50288.pdf