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Strategies for managing learner misbehaviour in Namibian schools: Learners' perspective

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Authors:
Emilia N. Mbongo[1]
Helena Miranda[1]

Affiliations:
[1]Department of Applied Educational Sciences, School of Education, Faculty of Education and Human Sciences, University of Namibia, Rundu, Namibia

Corresponding author:
Emilia Mbongo,
embongo@unam.na

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Background: Managing learner misbehaviour is central to successful teaching and learning. As key players in the teaching and learning process, learners' voices are important to consider when designing disciplinary frameworks.

Aim: This article aimed to explore effective strategies for managing learner misbehaviour from learners' perspectives, bridging the gap in which disciplinary policies are often implemented without consulting learners.

Setting: Data were collected from 1262 learners across 78 secondary schools in all 14 education regions in Namibia.

Methods: The study employed a mixed-methods approach using a convergent parallel design. Data were collected using a questionnaire containing closed and open-ended items. Responses from the closed-ended items were analysed using the Statistical Package for Social Sciences (SPSS) (IBM Corp, Armonk, NY, United States [US]), whereas the open-ended responses were analysed through thematic content analysis.

Results: The study findings reveal that learners prefer relational and restorative interventions compared to punitive ones. Specifically, 81% of participants indicated that parental involvement is the most effective strategy, followed by private, one-on-one conversations. Conversely, the results reveal that traditional punitive measures such as corporal punishment and public shaming were rated as ineffective and damaging to the teacher-learner relationship. However, a contradictory finding emerged regarding serious offences: 67% of learners indicated it is necessary to involve law enforcement for major transgressions such as theft, fighting, or alcohol and drugs.

Conclusion: The study concludes that schools should move from reactive, exclusionary practices towards a three-way model of behaviour management that is restorative, preventive and structured.

Contribution: By focusing on learner-centred strategies, schools can foster more equitable and supportive environments conducive to academic success.

Keywords: behaviour management; discipline; learners; approaches; misbehaviour; Namibia; schools.

Introduction

Background

Learner misbehaviour is among the most significant challenges that teachers encounter in their teaching careers. Within the international literature, classroom disruption is framed not only as an inconvenience but as a primary catalyst for occupational stress, psychological burnout and increasing rates of teacher attrition (Akkaş Baysal & Ocak 2021; Enright 2025; Jinot & Johannes 2021; Prater 2025). It indicates that persistent misbehaviour severely compromises the classroom dynamic, diverting limited pedagogical time from academic tasks to crisis management and frequently leading teachers to leave the teaching profession prematurely. Vidić, Đuranović and Klasnić (2021), surveying 603 primary and secondary school teachers, identified student misbehaviour and the support teachers receive from parents as significant predictors of satisfaction with the teaching profession, with misbehaviour itself correlating negatively with job satisfaction and positively with burnout.

In post-independence Namibia, learner misbehaviour has emerged as a critical systemic issue, as evidenced by documented problems of bullying, disruptive behaviour, fighting, theft, vandalism

and other problems (Makendano 2019; Mbongo 2016; Mudumbi 2017; Upindi 2012). While macro-level institutional data show that these incidences of misbehaviour are increasing, emerging behavioural frameworks suggest that such conduct should not be misconstrued as intentional defiance. Rather, contemporary developmental psychology frames misbehaviour as an overt symptom of deep-seated, unmet psychosocial needs, frequently rooted in structural poverty, academic frustration, boredom and attention-seeking within under-resourced environments (Emekako 2026). Considering the reasons for learner misbehaviour, it is important that it is managed effectively to prevent the negative consequences associated with such conduct. Hence, managing learner misbehaviour would require a paradigm shift from punitive enforcement to specialised, relational-driven behaviour management approaches (Porter 2020).

To address learner misbehaviour, the Ministry of Education in Namibia introduced policies such as 'Discipline from within: An alternative to corporal punishment' to promote positive discipline in schools (Ministry of Education and Culture 1992). However, the implementation of these policies remains inconsistent across schools, as the implementation is often driven by systemic constraints. Issues such as overcrowded classrooms and high learner-to-teacher ratios (Mbundje & Shikalepo 2025) make individualised, restorative dialogues difficult for teachers. A critical gap in professional development leaves teachers with theoretical mandates but no practical, localised training in de-escalation. Lastly, deeply rooted cultural and underlying ideological beliefs about teaching often equate strict, retributive discipline with respect, causing covert resistance to non-punitive strategies. As a result, research in Namibian schools demonstrates that many educators continue to rely on predominantly retributive and exclusionary approaches, as they experience difficulties in adopting restorative frameworks advocated by national policies (Antonio 2017; Mbongo 2016; Upindi 2012). The challenge of using punitive approaches is that they fail to address the underlying causes of misbehaviour and can damage learner-teacher relationships, leading to resentment and further disruptions.

A notable gap in current research and practice is the exclusion of learners' views and perspectives in the design and evaluation of disciplinary practices. According to Mitra (2018), interventions are often developed by administrators and educators without considering learners' perspectives on effective strategies for managing misbehaviour. This article directly addresses this empirical gap by using data from a broad investigation of behavioural dynamics in Namibian schools. This article is part of a larger study that investigated learner misbehaviour in Namibian schools. This article specifically focuses on effective strategies for managing learner misbehaviour, focusing on what learners themselves identify as effective and fair management, which is a crucial but often overlooked dimension. This article argues that the most effective strategies for managing learner misbehaviour are those that learners themselves perceive as fair, respectful and constructive.

Literature review

Many young people face significant social, emotional and behavioural needs that manifest into a range of behavioural challenges in schools. Adolescents in particular face challenges such as academic pressure, peer pressure, bullying, substance abuse, social exclusion and competition (Ahuja, Saha & Kumar 2021; Pandey 2025). Ahuja et al. (2021) note that the many challenges that learners encounter often lead to deterioration in their psychosocial and behavioural adjustment. Therefore, it is important to adopt a more comprehensive approach that prioritises early identification, comprehensive planning, prevention and instruction in social-emotional skills, instead of depending entirely on disciplinary enforcement (Burden 2025; Sprague & Walker 2021).

Theoretical framework

This review is framed through a synthesis of Vygotsky's socio-cultural theory and the systematic architecture of Positive Behaviour Interventions and Support (PBIS). The socio-cultural theory posits that human cognitive development is shaped by cultural and social factors (Kozulin et al. 2012). The positive behaviour interventions and support is an evidence-based, three-tiered framework designed to enhance school climate, safety and learner socio-emotional competence (Bradshaw, Mitchell & Leaf 2010). In the PBIS framework, behaviour management moves away from punitive discipline to proactive prevention. Sugai and Horner (2009) note that PBIS organises learner support through a multi-tiered system of support, starting with universal prevention, followed by targeted interventions and ending with individualised support for the concerned learner.

This PBIS framework operationalises the socio-cultural scaffolding by organising behavioural interventions into a clear three-tiered system of support: (1) universal prevention, (2) targeted interventions and (3) support. The review has been guided by this dual lens, and the researchers have explicitly outlined the strategies in terms of their operational timing and systemic function. This has eliminated conceptual repetition and examined the exact conditions under which these strategies succeed and fail.

Proactive and preventive management strategies

Teachers should adopt effective strategies to address and mitigate learner misbehaviour. The effectiveness of the classroom environment in promoting learning depends on the teacher's behaviour management practices (Beahm, Yan & Cook 2021; George, Sakirudeen & Sunday 2017). Instead of viewing proactive strategies as a homogeneous collection of tools, a synthesis of the literature suggests that universal prevention works through a vital tension between two distinct dimensions: (1) relational climate-building and (2) structural-environmental engineering.

Al-Ghamdi (2017) states that creating a conducive environment through praise, constructive feedback, and a supportive, caring, welcoming attitude could help learners feel safe and improve behaviour. Wangdi and Namgyel (2022) suggest that effective classroom management can help reduce disruptive behaviour. However, Robinson et al. (2022) push this relational concept further by identifying a specific conditional mechanism that involves learners in democratic rule-setting and employs engaging, learner-centred teaching. They argue that praise is not enough; the atmosphere is genuinely preventive only when learners have democratic participation in setting expectations, thereby creating internal accountability.

In contrast to this relational focus, Singh (2022) identifies environmental and structural factors as proactive tools, such as intentional classroom organisation, implementation of equitable standards and appropriate pacing of academic activities to sustain engagement. This brings up an important debate in the literature. Advocates of relational techniques believe that behaviour change is a function of psychological safety, whereas structural theorists believe that behaviour is a byproduct of instructional momentum.

The most effective behaviour management strategies are those based on prevention-based approaches as opposed to reactive approaches (Hepburn, Beamish & Alston-Knox 2021; Simonsen & Meyers 2025). However, a critical limitation of this foundational literature is its Western bias, which assumes well-resourced, low-density classrooms. However, implementing these strategies in Namibia and Africa in general may prove challenging due to structural barriers. Many public schools in Namibia are still faced with overcrowded classrooms with class sizes exceeding 40 learners – 50 learners (Mbundje & Shikalepo 2025). The overcrowded classrooms render recommendations for 'intentional spatial organisation' (Singh 2022) physically impossible. Similarly, individualistic praise models (Al-Ghamdi 2017) are diluted by high learner-to-teacher ratios. For proactive strategies to be effective in African countries like Namibia, they must be adopted from Western individualistic frameworks into collective, peer-mediated and whole-group accountability structures.

Responsive and relational interventions

While preventive strategies are important, teachers should also be prepared to address misbehaviour when it occurs. We define responsive strategies as the immediate relational actions a teacher takes at the moment of infraction, as distinct from proactive strategies, which are oriented towards the environment before misbehaviour occurs (Wachtel 2016). How a teacher responds immediately when misbehaviour occurs is the true test for a teacher's relational expertise, shifting focus from reactive control to collaborative problem-solving. Relational interventions prioritise relationships over the transgression. This approach is underpinned by emotional constancy, as described by Robinson et al. (2022), in which teachers use low-arousal strategies such as non-threatening posture and active listening to avoid mirroring a learner's escalation and instead to lower their physiological stress response. According to Hadwin, Jarvela and Miller (2018), from a socio-cultural perspective, the teacher functions as a crucial behavioural co-regulator, lending their own neutral and emotional stability to scaffold the learner's erratic emotional state. It is thus important for teachers to employ private, composed and solution-focused strategies when misbehaviour occurs.

Within the PBIS framework, such responses form part of a multi-tiered continuum of support that prioritises clarity, relationships and engagement over uniform punishment (Petrasek et al. 2022). The PBIS, in particular, have gained momentum in the management of learner behaviour, with many researchers praising its effectiveness (Angus & Nelson 2021; Hollands et al. 2022; McIntosh et al. 2021). Ultimately, as McIntosh et al. (2021) suggest, the goal of behaviour management is not about mere compliance but should aim for the development of self-regulation and social-emotional fluency. This transforms the teacher's role into that of a co-regulator (Hadwin et al. 2018), ensuring that even during disruptions, both teaching momentum and the learner's dignity remain intact.

However, the literature ignores the immense psychological impact this intervention approach might have on teachers. In the context of Namibian schools, where teachers face high workload stressors alongside large class sizes (Kaupa 2020; Mbudje et al. 2025), maintaining emotional stability requires emotional labour. As a result, exhausted teachers often revert to swift, reactive punishments.

Restorative approaches

In addition to preventive and responsive strategies, it is also important that teachers employ restorative approaches to managing learner misbehaviour. To maintain conceptual clarity, restorative approaches must be differentiated from responsive ones: While responsive interventions target immediate de-escalation during crisis, restorative strategies provide a framework for repairing relationships when things go wrong in addition to building and maintaining relationships (Jones et al. 2023). Jinot and Johannes (2021) advocate for these positive behavioural interventions in managing learner behaviour as opposed to punitive approaches. Restorative approaches have been documented as effective in improving the school climate, discipline and positive conflict management through actions that aim at preventing suspensions, exclusions, conflicts and misbehaviour (Lodi et al. 2022).

Nevertheless, the use of restorative approaches remains contested. Whereas many researchers support the use of restorative approaches, citing their effectiveness in managing learner misbehaviour, Kapembwa (2022) found that these practices do not promote positive behaviour among learners but rather cause them to repeat offensive behaviours. Similarly, Sondo, Mncube and Adu (2023)

reported that many teachers in South Africa perceive positive discipline as ineffective; as such, they continue to use negative disciplinary measures to deal with misbehaving learners. Despite divergent views on the effectiveness of restorative and positive approaches to discipline, the prevailing academic consensus is that the long-term developmental benefits outweigh the perceived efficiency of punitive discipline.

Research methods and design

Study design

The present study followed a mixed-methods approach, using a convergent parallel design. According to Creswell and Plano Clark (2018), the mixed methods approach focuses on collecting, analysing and mixing both quantitative and qualitative data in a single study or series of studies. Its central premise is that combining quantitative and qualitative approaches provides a better understanding of research problems than either approach alone. Under this convergent parallel design, the quantitative and qualitative strands were implemented simultaneously yet independently during a single data collection phase. The two strands were kept separate during the initial data analysis phase to maintain the structural integrity of each methodology. Integration occurred at the interpretation and results stage through an analytical side-by-side comparison, in which qualitative narrative themes were used to directly expand, validate and contextualise the statistical frequencies derived from the quantitative data.

The use of mixed methods allowed qualitative data to provide a detailed understanding of the problem, while quantitative data offered a more general perspective (Creswell & Plano Clark 2018).

Population

The population is the entire group of people to which the researcher wishes to generalise the study findings (Gay, Mills & Airasian 2016). The population of this study comprises learners in the secondary school phase (Grade 8 – Grade 12) in Namibia. These learners are either in combined schools or secondary schools. There were 785 schools with Grade 8 – Grade 12 (Ministry of Education, Arts and Culture 2023). The target population comprises all learners in the 785 schools in Namibia with Grade 8 – Grade 12.

Sample and sampling procedures

There are 14 education regions in Namibia, with 785 combined and secondary schools. A multi-stage sampling method was used to select 10% of the schools in each region (see the No. of schools sampled column in Table 1), yielding 78 schools across the regions. This was done by obtaining class lists and selecting EVERY tenth learner from each list. This led to 1262 learners participating in the investigation.

TABLE 1: Number of schools and learners sampled per education region.

Region	No. of schools in the region	% of national school total	No. of schools sampled	No. of learners sampled
Karas	20	3%	2	23
Erongo	34	4%	3	97
Hardap	17	2%	2	20
Kavango East	45	6%	5	81
Kavango West	29	4%	3	58
Khomas	49	6%	5	69
Kunene	23	3%	2	43
Ohangwena	153	19%	15	151
Omaheke	13	2%	1	20
Omusati	137	17%	14	208
Oshana	74	9%	7	97
Oshikoto	99	13%	10	227
Otjozondjupa	32	4%	3	51
Zambezi	60	8%	6	117
Total	**785**	**100%**	**78**	**1262**

Instrumentation

A questionnaire with open-ended and closed-ended items was used to collect data from learners. Due to the project's scope, questionnaires allowed for collecting data from a large and diverse sample and provided a broader representation of the target population (Gay et al. 2016). Using both open-ended and closed-ended questions in a questionnaire helped participants respond to structured items quickly and provided relevant information on effective strategies for managing learner misbehaviour (Creswell 2014). The questionnaire consisted of three primary sections. The first section captured participant demographic information. The second section comprised the quantitative strand, with 15 closed-ended items scored on a 3-point Likert-type scale (1 = Ineffective, 2 = Neutral and 3 = Effective). These items prompted participants to evaluate the efficacy of 13 common behaviour management practices. The last section comprised the qualitative strand, consisting of broad open-ended prompt items designed to capture deeper individual narratives.

To ensure the instrument's validity, content and face validity were established through a formal panel review consisting of two former Senior Education Officers (school counsellors) and three research experts. The panel evaluated item clarity, cultural appropriateness and alignment with research objectives. To establish reliability for the quantitative items, a pilot study was conducted with a small convenience sample of 40 secondary school learners from a non-sampled school in the Kavango East region.

Data collection procedures

Creswell and Plano Clark (2018) noted that researchers require permission to collect data from individuals and sites and that this permission often needs to be sought from multiple individuals and levels in organisations. Permission to conduct this research was sought and obtained from the Executive Director of the Ministry of Education in Namibia and the Directors of Education in all the regions. The researchers and research assistants travelled to the sampled

schools to administer and collect the questionnaires. All sampled learners were gathered in a single classroom, where the researchers introduced themselves and explained the study (its nature, purpose and benefits). Learners were then given time to read through the information sheet and ask questions if they had. If they had no questions, learners were advised to sign the consent form and return it to the researchers if they wished to take part in the study. Upon completing the consent form, each learner received a copy of the questionnaire, which was explained in detail. Learners were encouraged to ask questions about any items they did not understand in the questionnaire; after doing so, they completed the questionnaires and returned them to the research team. These procedures were conducted during breaks and after normal teaching time to avoid disrupting teaching and learning. It took learners approximately 40 min to complete the questionnaire.

Data analysis

The qualitative data from the questionnaires were analysed through content analysis to identify deeper meanings in individual responses. The qualitative data were coded and categorised into themes. The quantitative data were analysed using the Statistical Package for the Social Sciences (SPSS). Descriptive statistics enabled easy, quick interpretation of large datasets and understanding (Creswell 2014). Descriptive summary statistics, such as percentages, were used to identify general themes to be integrated with the themes from the qualitative data to provide high-quality findings for a more complete understanding of learner misbehaviour in schools in Namibia.

Ethical considerations

Ethical clearance to conduct this study was obtained from the University of Namibia Research Ethics Committee (No. Ex 4/7/2023).

Results

The quantitative survey and qualitative data are presented together to minimise repetition and improve the clarity of the conclusions. Figure 1 shows the baseline percentages of learners who agreed or disagreed that the 13 common management strategies listed were effective.

The thematic content analysis of learners' qualitative accounts expands on these percentages. The responses are grouped into three broad behavioural dimensions: (1) talking and discussion, (2) punitive and exclusionary discipline and (3) transformative educational activities.

Theme 1: Talking and discussions

Figure 1 shows that the majority of learners (81%) believe that the most effective approach to address misbehaviour is calling parents to school and involving them in resolving the behaviour challenge. Calling the misbehaving learner and speaking with them in private was chosen as the second most effective method for addressing misbehaviour, as indicated by 68% of participants. The qualitative responses unpack the underlying mechanics of these numbers, with participants framing private discussions as essential spaces of dignity that de-escalate emotional friction. For example, a learner said:

> 'Approach learners privately. Do not act aggressively towards the misbehaving learner because you will only worsen the situation.' (Learner L02OK67, Grade 11, Aged 18 years and older)

Similarly, another learner said:

> 'Consult learners privately; avoid aggressive talk when talking to learners; be friendly to learners.' (Learner L11OK67, Grade 12, Aged 18 years and older)

Furthermore, participants emphasised that conversations must uncover external domestic traumas that trigger classroom disruptions:

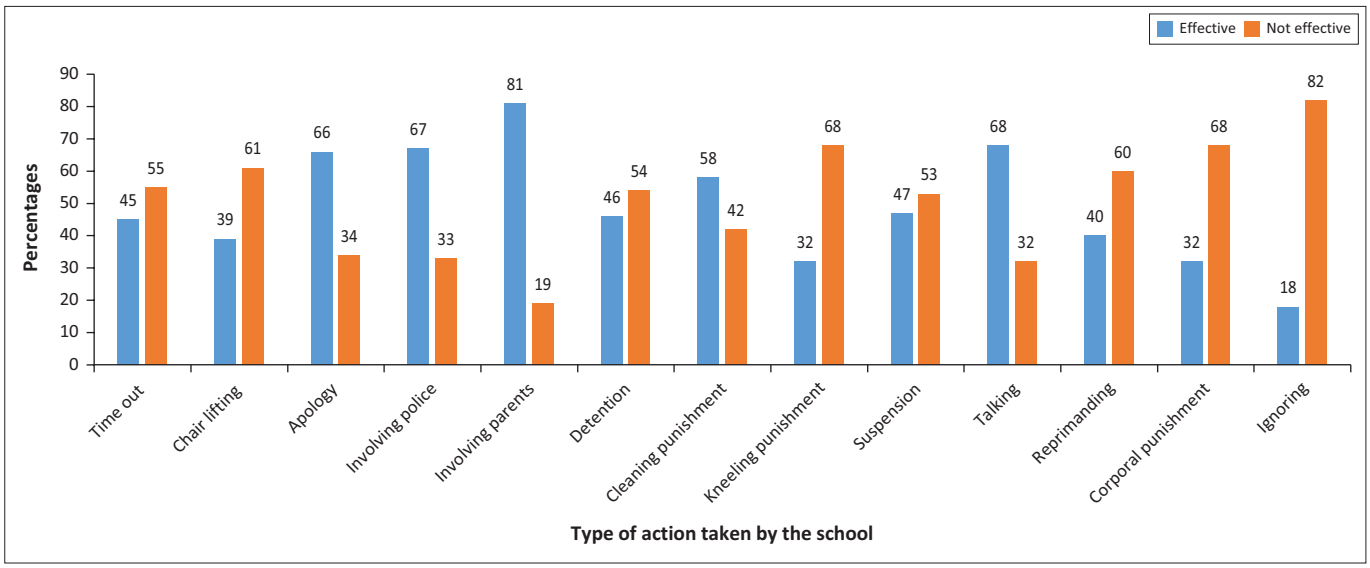

FIGURE 1: Learners' ratings of the effectiveness of 13 school actions for managing misbehaviour (N = 1262), percentage rating each action effective versus not effective.

> 'Talk to the learners and ask them to tell their problems; also find out about who they stay with at home, as some of them face violence in their homes.' (Learner L01KE11, Grade 10, Aged 16)

The need for personal diagnosis links directly to learner requests for systemic counselling frameworks. Participants argue that teachers are often structurally ill-equipped for this diagnostic role, calling for 'outside voices' such as social workers: 'Counselling by Life Skills teacher or Social worker' (Learner L12OK67, Grade 12, Aged 18 years or older), or 'Calling the officials from the Ministry of Gender to talk to the learners' (Learner L04KW14, Grade 12, aged 18 years or older). As seen in Figure 1, learners are in full support and thus suggest talking or having conversations as a way to manage learner misbehaviour.

Theme 2: Punitive and exclusionary discipline

While supporting interventions dominated learner preferences, the integrated data reveal a secondary, remarkably rigid stance regarding community preservation and school safety. Figure 1 shows that 47% of learners rated formal suspension as an effective strategy for managing learner misbehaviour. Qualitative statements clarify that this support for exclusionary discipline is driven by the need to protect the learning environment of the non-disruptive majority from major violations. For example, one learner stated:

> 'Blacklist all learners who misbehave so that they will not attend school at that particular school again.' (Learner L03KE11. Grade 10, Aged 16 years)

Similarly, another learner said:

> 'Expulsion of learners who commit major offences like being found with alcohol, drugs, and harmful weapons.' (Learner L18OT70, Grade 9, Aged 17 years)

Another participant had this to say:

> 'Getting rid of learners who are violent, bully others, and fight on school premises.' (Learner L25ER04, Grade 10, Aged 17 years)

The most striking analytical tension in the study manifests around legalistic force. A substantial 67% of participants indicated that calling the police to resolve learner misbehaviour is an effective measure. In qualitative descriptions, this view was accompanied by requests for physical discipline by the police:

> 'Take them to the police station for the night to be whipped.' (Learner L013KH18, Grade 10, Aged 16 years)

Some learners feel misbehaving learners should be arrested, especially when they commit major offences such as stealing or fighting. Some participants suggested that there should be police officers at schools to handle learner misbehaviour, with a learner saying:

> 'The school should have a permanent police officer at the school who can talk to misbehaving learners and also beat them.' (Learner L06KW15, Grade 11, Aged 16 years)

Critically, this strong advocacy for physical discipline by the police exists alongside an explicit rejection of corporal punishment at school, with 68% of the participants indicating that corporal punishment is not an effective method in managing learner misbehaviour. Similarly, punishing learners by making them kneel or lift chairs was rated as ineffective in managing learner misbehaviour.

Theme 3: Educative activities for managing learner misbehaviour

The final theme centres on structural and environmental engineering aimed at preventing misbehaviour before it occurs. This indicates that learners favour constructive, transformative activities over idle isolation or empty exclusion. Learners voiced a strong desire for schools to implement awareness and motivational activities. For example, one participant said:

> 'Motivate learners, educate us about the negative impact of misbehaviour.' (Learner L10OK67, Grade 9, Aged 15 years)

Another participant added:

> '[C]reate awareness of the bad effects of misbehaviour; alert learners of their actions.' (Learner L03OK68, Grade 10, Aged 17 years)

Similarly, another participant stated:

> 'Allow learners to engage in other activities such as sports and bible studies.' (Learner L02OK68, Grade 11, Aged 16 years)

Some participants feel it will be beneficial for schools to have clubs aimed at learners experiencing behaviour problems. For example, one participant said:

> 'Having clubs related to misbehaviour in the school to help and teach learners about good behaviour.' (Learner L05HA37, Grade 11, Aged 17 years)

In the same line, one learner stated:

> 'Open a club for learners to share their problems, as they do not trust teachers.' (Learner L10KH18, Grade 12, Aged 17 years)

From the study findings, it is evident that learners want to see schools have educational programmes and activities that learners can engage in as a way of managing misbehaviour.

Discussion

Effective strategies for managing learner misbehaviour, focusing on what learners themselves identify as effective and fair, are important and often overlooked. This study investigated effective strategies for managing learner misbehaviour from learners' perspectives. The findings of this study reveal learners' preferences for a mixture of relational, preventive and punitive practices, partly aligning with the literature.

The importance of relational and proactive strategies

The results of the study indicate that learners strongly advocate for dialogue with misbehaving learners and for parental involvement. With 81% of the participants indicating parental involvement as the most effective strategy, and 68% advocating for private conversations, this finding aligns with Robinson et al.'s (2022) theories on the efficacy of relational strategies. Similarly, previous research (Owino, Mesmer & Njihia 2023; Tanase 2019) suggests that collective handling of learner misbehaviour by teachers and parents leads to better resolution of challenging behaviour. For example, Learner L010KE11 (Grade 8, Aged 15 years) emphasised the importance of empathy, suggesting that teachers should 'find out what makes them misbehave' rather than respond aggressively. This perspective supports the assertion that misbehaviour often stems from unmet needs, such as domestic violence or social frustration, rather than intentional defiance (Emekako 2026). When teachers 'talk to the learner' privately, they preserve the learner's dignity and avoid the resentment that often results from public, punitive approaches.

Deconstructing the disciplinary paradox: School versus state authority

An interesting point made by this study is the complex contradiction in learners' perceptions of institutional force and authority. While 68% of learners reject school corporal punishment and dismiss domestic penalties (such as kneeling or lifting chairs) as ineffective in managing learner misbehaviour, 67% simultaneously endorse police involvement and defend corporal punishment when administered by law enforcement. This striking paradox reveals that learners do not interpret authority or discipline uniformly; instead, they draw a sharp line between school-level classroom management and macro-level state security. Traditional classroom punishments are viewed as damaging to learners, as research evidence indicates that inflicting pain on learners is associated with physical, academic, mental health and behavioural problems (Alison, Beers & Peterson 2023; Heekes et al. 2022). However, when behaviour escalates to major offences, learners perceive these actions as direct threats to their physical safety. The qualitative assertion that 'teachers are too soft' and the call for police physical discipline reflect an acute sense of environmental vulnerability. This indicates that learners view the school disciplinary methods as weak, thus leading to a perceived need for external militarised state authority to restore order, prioritising the collective safety of the majority over the individual rehabilitative rights of the disruptive minority.

Strengthening the support system: Counselling and education

The participants in this study raised the need for improved learner support, specifically counselling by school counsellors (Life Skills teachers) or by outside mental health professionals such as social workers. Participants also indicated the need for educational activities and extracurricular clubs to help those experiencing behavioural issues. The findings highlight a significant structural deficit within the school system. Although all schools have, or are supposed to have, school counsellors (Life Skills teachers) as per the Ministry of Education (2011) directive, the learners' responses indicate that their counselling mandate might not be fully fulfilled. Learners reported a lack of trust in teachers when it comes to addressing sensitive matters. This finding is important as it shows that perceiving teachers primarily as authority figures responsible for grading and discipline undermines their capacity to serve as confidants. Learners calling for 'outside voices' shows that learners are effectively requesting a psychologically safe space separate from the traditional evaluative nature of the classroom. Learner L028KE11 (Grade 10, Aged 16 years) states that the availability of Life Skills teachers who are 'willing to listen' and 'take learners' problems seriously' is regarded as a preventive measure. This view is in line with the PBIS model (McIntosh et al. 2021), which posits that about 80% of behavioural problems can be addressed through universal, proactive support and teaching of social skills.

The learners' preference for behaviour clubs and Bible study groups reveals a desire for a community-based approach to behaviour management. The clubs and Bible study groups fulfil two important functions: (1) providing proactive teaching and (2) instilling a sense of identity and belonging in learners. Instead of reacting when rules are broken, these clubs often offer teaching in social skills (Burden 2025), equipping learners with skills to manage peer pressure and frustration before these challenges result in misconduct. For many young people, misbehaviour may indicate a need for attention or arise from social exclusion (Pandey 2025). Clubs and sports thus offer the proactive and preventive engagement that Robinson et al. (2022) identified as important for developing positive teacher-learner relationships. The data further show that learners consider education as both an academic and a transformative social process. The call to 'motivate learners' and 'create awareness on the negative effects of misbehaviour' demonstrates a preference for cognitive-behavioural interventions as opposed to exclusionary practices. By redirecting attention from punitive responses to strategies that support learner growth, schools can implement restorative approaches as suggested by Jinot and Johannes (2021), therefore improving the school climate at a foundational level.

Conclusion

For effective learner behaviour management, it is crucial that schools move away from punitive practices through policy-aligned training, fostering trust and a school environment where learners thrive. As key players in the teaching and learning process, learners' voices are important to consider. The findings of this study show that in order to bridge the gap between policy and practice, schools should adopt a three-way model of managing learner misbehaviour, that:

(1) restorative, (2) preventive and (3) structured. Restorative practices such as counselling and parental involvement aim to repair relationships. Preventive practices such as extracurricular clubs and educational awareness are needed in schools to engage at-risk learners. On the other hand, structured, clear and fair consequences for major offences are important to maintain safety for both teachers and learners. Ultimately, the study reinforces the central argument that the most effective strategies are those that learners see as fair and respectful. When learners feel heard and supported, the need for police intervention, suspensions and expulsions, which are strategies typically employed out of desperation, is significantly reduced.

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Competing interests

The authors, Emilia N. Mbongo and Helena Miranda, declare that they have no financial or personal relationships that may have inappropriately influenced them in writing this article. The author, Helena Miranda, serve as an editorial board member of this journal. The peer review process for this submission was handled independently, and the author had no involvement in the editorial decision-making process for this article. The author have no other competing interests to declare.

CRediT authorship contribution

Emilia N. Mbongo: Conceptualisation, Data curation, Formal analysis, Funding acquisition, Investigation, Methodology, Project administration, Resources, Visualisation, Writing – original draft, Writing – review & editing. Helena Miranda: Conceptualisation, Formal analysis, Investigation, Methodology, Resources, Supervision, Writing – review & editing. All authors reviewed the article, contributed to the discussion of results, approved the final version for submission and publication, and take responsibility for the integrity of its findings.

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Data availability

The data that support the findings of this study are not openly available due to reasons of sensitivity and are available from the corresponding author, Emilia N. Mbongo, upon reasonable request.

Disclaimer

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