



## **Impact of Learner Behavior on Academic Performance: Leadership Strategies for Classroom Dynamics and Discipline Management**

Rudzani Israel LUMADI

Associate Professor, Department of Educational Leadership and Management  
University of South Africa, South Africa  
<https://orcid.org/0000-0001-9466-2854>

### **Abstract**

This study examines how learner behaviour impacts academic outcomes and classroom dynamics in secondary schools, with a particular focus on leadership strategies for managing discipline. Using a qualitative research design, the study gathered in-depth perspectives from participants including two teachers, two School Management Team members (also parents), and four student leaders through semi-structured interviews and document analysis. Thematic analysis revealed that disruptive learner behaviour diminishes academic performance by reducing instructional time and creating a negative classroom atmosphere. Participants emphasized the importance of proactive leadership practices, such as positive reinforcement, restorative discipline methods, and stakeholder collaboration. The study also noted that learner behaviour affects socialization, peer relationships, and overall student well-being. Schools that implement inclusive and supportive discipline strategies foster a sense of belonging and social cohesion, which in turn enhances academic engagement and performance. The findings indicate that effective discipline management requires a balanced, holistic approach that combines strict policies with supportive interventions to promote both behavioural and academic success. The study contributes valuable insights to the discussion on educational leadership and discipline in secondary education, underscoring the need for educator training to better address diverse student needs. Ultimately, fostering an environment that values academic and personal growth prepares students for success beyond the classroom. In summary, this investigation highlights blending supportive and corrective measures as vital for preserving optimal learning conditions, ensuring students remain engaged and achieve academic excellence.

*Keywords: Academic performance, Classroom dynamics, Discipline management, Learner behaviour*

### **Introduction**

Learner behaviour significantly influences academic performance and the overall learning environment. Disruptive behaviours can hinder instructional time, diminish student engagement, and adversely affect academic outcomes. Conversely, positive behaviours contribute to a conducive learning atmosphere, fostering academic success. Effective classroom management is essential for promoting desirable behaviours and mitigating disruptions (Letuma, 2023). Research indicates that well-implemented management strategies enhance student engagement and learning outcomes.

Classroom dynamics are shaped by the interplay between learner behaviours and management practices. (Banihashem, Noroozi, Van Ginkel, Macfadyen & Biemans, 2022). Teachers who establish clear expectations and maintain consistent routines create structured environments that support learning. Proactive strategies, such as positive reinforcement and active learning, encourage student participation and reduce behavioural issues. A study by Mila, Yasir, Mahyudin Ahmad & Aprilianto, (2024) emphasizes the importance of creating positive learning environments to minimize disruptive behaviours and reward engagement. School leadership plays a pivotal role in shaping classroom management practices. Principals who provide professional development opportunities and foster collaborative cultures empower teachers to implement effective discipline strategies. Leadership styles that promote shared decision-making and open communication contribute to improved

classroom dynamics and student behaviour. Research by Warren (2021) highlights the significance of leadership in supporting effective classroom management. In the context of South African secondary schools, innovative leadership strategies are crucial for managing learner discipline. Challenges such as large class sizes and diverse student populations necessitate adaptive approaches. Implementing evidence-based management techniques, supported by strong leadership, can enhance academic performance and create positive classroom environments. A comprehensive understanding of the relationship between learner behaviour, classroom dynamics, and leadership strategies is essential for educators aiming to improve educational outcomes (Day, Gu & Sammons, 2016).

#### The educational Literature review

Learner behaviour in South African secondary schools encompasses the actions, attitudes, and interactions of students within the school environment, directly influencing academic performance, classroom dynamics, and overall discipline. While positive behaviours, such as active engagement and cooperation, contribute to a conducive learning atmosphere, disruptive behaviours such as inattentiveness, aggression, and defiance can hinder the learning process for both individual students and their peers. Maponya (2020) emphasizes the necessity of structured discipline guidelines to promote a safe and effective learning environment, aligning with the South African Schools Act (Republic of South Africa, 1996). However, the persistent challenges associated with learner discipline in secondary schools highlight the need for effective leadership and classroom management strategies to address these concerns.

Several studies have established a direct link between learner behaviour and academic performance. Legaki, Xi, Hamari, Karpouzis, and Assimakopoulos (2020) found that student behaviour significantly impacts academic achievement by shaping both individual learning experiences and the broader classroom environment. Similarly, Wang, Degol, Amemiya, Parr, and Guo (2020) reinforce that disruptive behaviours impair academic progress, necessitating structured interventions. Classroom management plays a crucial role in mitigating behavioural issues and fostering engagement. Muntaner-Mas, Morales, Martínez-de-Quel, Lubans, and García-Hermoso (2024) highlight effective classroom management techniques, including setting clear expectations, enforcing consistent consequences, and nurturing positive teacher-student relationships. These approaches enhance student participation, reduce disruptions, and ultimately improve academic outcomes. Educational leadership also plays a pivotal role in shaping classroom dynamics and discipline management. Monigir, Samuel Mosey, Meytha, Wongkar, and Davison Pagawak (2024) emphasize the importance of school leadership in equipping teachers with the skills needed for effective classroom management. Ostrowski (2023) further notes that professional development and supportive leadership structures enable teachers to implement discipline strategies successfully.

While existing literature consistently highlights the impact of learner behaviour on academic performance, contradictions and gaps remain in the effectiveness of various disciplinary approaches. Traditional punitive measures such as suspensions and expulsions have been widely criticized for exacerbating disengagement and academic failure (Iruka, Durden, Escayg & Curenton, 2023). In contrast, restorative justice approaches focus on repairing harm and fostering accountability, yet their implementation in South African schools remains inconsistent due to resource limitations and lack of training. Leadership strategies in classroom discipline also reveal inconsistencies. While research by Yasmeen, Mustafa, Sheikh, Saqib, and Mehmood (2023) suggests that shared decision-making and open communication enhance discipline management, some studies indicate that hierarchical leadership styles remain dominant in many South African schools, limiting the effectiveness of participatory approaches. Additionally, despite widespread acknowledgment of the importance of teacher training in behaviour management, significant gaps persist in the availability of professional development programs tailored to classroom discipline challenges.

To address these challenges, future research should focus on evaluating the effectiveness of restorative justice practices in diverse school contexts, identifying the best approaches for implementation in resource-constrained environments. Additionally, empirical studies should investigate how different leadership styles influence discipline outcomes in South African secondary schools, with an emphasis on participatory and transformational leadership models. Moreover, there is a need for policy reforms that integrate evidence-based classroom management strategies into teacher training programs, ensuring that educators are equipped with the necessary skills to foster positive learner behaviour. School leaders should also implement structured mentorship and peer-support systems for both teachers and student leaders, promoting a collaborative approach to discipline management. By bridging these gaps, schools can create an environment that supports academic excellence through effective behaviour management strategies.

### Theoretical Framework

The impact of learner behaviour on academic performance, classroom dynamics, and discipline management can be understood through the integration of Social Learning Theory and Transformational Leadership Theory. These theories offer a complementary lens for examining how leadership strategies influence student conduct and overall learning outcomes.

Social Learning Theory, originally proposed by Krath, Schürmann & Von Korflesch (2021), asserts that behaviour is learned through observation, imitation, and reinforcement. Unlike behaviourist theories that emphasize direct reinforcement, Bandura highlights the role of vicarious learning, wherein individuals model their behaviour on influential figures within their environment. In an educational setting, teachers, school leaders, and peers serve as key role models, shaping students' behavioural patterns and attitudes toward learning. The application of Social Learning Theory in classroom dynamics suggests that when teachers demonstrate positive behaviours such as respect, cooperation, and academic diligence, students are more likely to emulate these behaviours, fostering a disciplined and productive learning environment. Conversely, exposure to negative behaviours, including teacher hostility or peer misconduct, can contribute to classroom disruptions and academic disengagement. This theory underscores the reciprocal nature of behaviour, in which students not only learn from their surroundings but also help shape the classroom climate.

On the other hand, Transformational Leadership Theory, introduced by MacGregor Burns and expanded by Ponting (2023), provides a leadership perspective that emphasizes vision-driven, inspirational leadership. Burns conceptualized transformational leadership as the process by which leaders motivate, inspire, and elevate followers beyond self-interest to achieve shared goals. Bass later refined this model, identifying four key dimensions: idealized influence, inspirational motivation, intellectual stimulation, and individualized consideration (Mokhber, bin Wan Ismail & Vakilhshi, 2015).

In an educational context, Transformational Leadership Theory posits that school leaders who articulate a clear vision, set high expectations, and foster an inclusive school culture significantly influence both teacher and student behaviour. Ponting (2023) argues that transformational leadership in schools is linked to improved discipline, increased student motivation, and higher academic performance. By fostering trust and collaboration, school leaders can instil a sense of shared responsibility, reducing behavioural issues and enhancing learning outcomes.

While both theories offer valuable insights into the relationship between learner behaviour, classroom dynamics, and leadership strategies, each has limitations. Social Learning Theory, though effective in explaining behaviour acquisition, does not fully address how school-wide structures and policies influence learner conduct. It also underestimates the role of intrinsic motivation, focusing primarily on external influences rather than personal agency.

Conversely, Transformational Leadership Theory emphasizes leadership as a primary driver of behaviour but does not account for the diverse socio-economic and cultural factors that shape student behaviour in South African schools. Some critics argue that transformational leadership assumes a homogeneous school culture, whereas real-world educational environments require context-specific leadership adaptations (Hadi, 2023).

### Method

This study employed a qualitative research methodology, aiming to explore the impact of learner behaviour on academic performance, classroom dynamics, and discipline management in South African secondary schools. The research was conducted in the Vhembe District of Limpopo Province, with a specific focus on the Senior Management Teams (SMTs) of secondary schools, as well as teachers and the Representative Council of Learners (RCLs).

A purposive sampling strategy was employed to select participants capable of providing rich and relevant insights into the management of learner discipline and its relationship with academic performance. The sample comprised eight participants: two teachers, two members of the School Management Team (SMT) who are also parents, and four student leaders. These participants were chosen for their diverse perspectives, which were expected to illuminate the multifaceted nature of discipline in the educational environment. Through semi-structured interviews, their experiences and opinions would be explored to better understand the dynamics at play between disciplinary measures and academic outcomes. This purposive selection aimed to encompass a diverse range of perspectives, ensuring that the data reflected an integrated approach to addressing learner discipline and academic achievement, as suggested by Welsh & Little (2018). These interviews were designed to explore various aspects of learner behaviour, including the implementation of the school code of conduct, the influence of classroom dynamics, and the support provided by the Department of Basic Education. The semi-structured format provided flexibility, enabling the researcher to delve deeper into participants' responses and

seek clarifications where necessary. Prior to the study, permission for data collection was obtained from the school management, and the interviews were conducted over three sessions, each lasting approximately 45 minutes. All sessions were recorded with participant consent, and the recordings were later transcribed into a notebook for further analysis.

The collected data were analysed using thematic analysis, as outlined by Terry, Hayfield, Clarke & Braun (2017). This involved identifying key themes and categorizing them based on their characteristics. To maintain organization and clarity, each participant was assigned a unique identifier which was used throughout the analysis to distinguish between individual responses and ensure anonymity. Thematic analysis facilitated the identification of recurring patterns and insights related to leadership strategies, classroom dynamics, and their impact on learner behaviour and academic performance.

### Findings

The findings of this study on the Impact of Learner Behavior on Academic Performance: Leadership Strategies for Classroom Dynamics and Discipline Management highlight key insights from the experiences and perspectives of two teachers, two School Management Team (SMT) members, and four student leaders. The analysis revealed various factors that link learner behaviour, leadership strategies, and classroom dynamics, and how these aspects impact academic performance.

#### **Theme 1: Impact of Learner Behavior on Academic Performance**

The study identified that learner behaviour directly influences academic performance, with both positive and negative outcomes. Teacher 1 emphasized, "When students engage in disruptive behaviour, it not only affects the student involved but also distracts others, making it harder for them to focus on learning." Similarly, Teacher 2 noted that "students who show consistent misbehaviour tend to perform poorly academically because they miss critical lessons or fail to engage fully." Both teachers pointed out the strong correlation between disruptive behaviour and reduced academic achievement, as it affects the entire classroom environment.

SMT Member 1 shared that managing behaviour is crucial for academic success:

"We have to ensure that learners understand how their actions affect not just themselves but also their peers' ability to learn." SMT Member 2 concurred, stating,

"Classroom discipline is fundamental to maintaining focus, which directly impacts academic performance. Without discipline, academic performance tends to decline."

Student Leader 1 also echoed these views, saying,

"When the classroom is chaotic, it's hard to learn, and it's even more difficult to focus on my assignments or exams." Similarly, Student Leader 2 shared, "In classrooms where behaviour is well-managed, I feel more confident and motivated to do well in my studies."

#### **Theme 2: Leadership Strategies in Managing Classroom Dynamics**

Effective leadership strategies were recognized as essential in shaping the classroom environment and promoting positive behaviour. Teacher 1 explained that strong leadership sets clear behavioural expectations:

"When school leadership provides a clear code of conduct, it helps manage the classroom dynamics and ensures students are aware of the boundaries."

Teacher 2 added that leadership must consistently reinforce these expectations: "It's not enough to just tell students what is expected; we need to model those behaviours ourselves."

SMT Member 1 discussed the importance of consistent leadership in reinforcing rules:

"As leaders, we must be consistent in our approach to discipline; inconsistency causes confusion and undermines authority." SMT Member 2 emphasized that leadership should be proactive: "Instead of waiting for issues to arise, we must anticipate challenges and address them early on to prevent disruption."

Student Leader 3 stated that leadership has a direct impact on student behaviour: "When our leaders actively engage with us and enforce clear rules, it makes us more aware of our own behaviour and its consequences." Student Leader 4 agreed, saying, "Good leadership creates an environment where we are motivated to follow the rules, and it keeps the class orderly."

#### **Theme 3: Restorative Practices and Discipline Management**

The use of restorative practices was highlighted as an effective strategy for managing learner behaviour and improving classroom dynamics. Teacher 1 emphasized,

"Restorative practices allow students to reflect on their actions and the harm they have caused, which leads to better accountability and improved behaviour."

Teacher 2 added, "Instead of just punishing students, restorative practices give them an opportunity to make amends, which helps them learn from their mistakes."

SMT Member 1 noted the positive impact of restorative approaches: "We have seen that restorative circles foster empathy and understanding, and this has led to a decrease in behavioural disruptions."

SMT Member 2 further explained, "Restorative practices align with our school's vision of fostering a supportive environment, which helps students build healthier relationships with one another and with their teachers."

Student Leader 1 shared their experience with restorative practices:

"Through restorative circles, I was able to understand how my actions affected my classmates, and I was given a chance to make things right."

Student Leader 2 echoed this sentiment, noting, "Restorative practices have made me feel heard and understood, and it motivates me to behave better in the future."

#### **Theme 4: Parental Involvement in Learner Behavior Management**

Parental involvement emerged as a critical factor in supporting learner behaviour and academic performance.

Teacher 1 observed, "When parents are actively involved in managing their child's behaviour, it leads to better academic performance. However, some parents struggle to engage due to various challenges."

Teacher 2 added, "Parental support is essential; we can't manage learner behaviour effectively without their input and cooperation."

SMT Member 1 highlighted the need for schools to strengthen home-school partnerships: "Parents play a crucial role in ensuring that learners understand the importance of good behaviour. We need to work together to support them in this."

SMT Member 2 explained that parental engagement often translates to better outcomes: "When parents are involved in reinforcing school discipline, students tend to perform better academically."

Student Leader 3 emphasized the role of parents in shaping behaviour: "My parents remind me of the importance of good behaviour and respect for my teachers, and it helps me stay focused in class."

Student Leader 4 also pointed out that parental involvement often leads to more responsible behaviour: "When my parents are in touch with the school, I feel more accountable for my actions, which encourages me to do better in my studies."

#### **Theme 5: Support from the Department of Basic Education**

The support from the Department of Basic Education (DBE) was also discussed as a factor influencing discipline management. Teacher 1 noted that, while the Department provides valuable resources, "the implementation of these resources sometimes feels inconsistent, and more direct support is needed from the DBE to ensure that policies are effectively enforced." Teacher 2 added, "We often lack the resources to fully implement the recommended discipline strategies, which affects the consistency of our approach."

SMT Member 1 commented that, despite the DBE's policies, "the lack of practical resources makes it challenging to manage behaviour effectively. More tangible support is needed for schools to implement discipline strategies."

SMT Member 2 highlighted the need for more specialized training: "There is a gap in teacher training for managing complex behavioural issues, and the DBE could play a bigger role in addressing this."

Student Leader 1 expressed frustration with inconsistent support: "The Department gives guidelines, but it's up to the school to make them work. Sometimes, this inconsistency makes it harder to address behaviour issues effectively."

Student Leader 2 also remarked, "The DBE's involvement is important, but we need more support from them in terms of training and resources to create a better learning environment."

#### **Discussion- Conclusions**

The findings of this study highlight the significant relationship between learner behaviour and academic performance, emphasizing the crucial role that leadership strategies play in managing classroom dynamics and discipline in South African secondary schools. The perspectives shared by two teachers, two School Management Team (SMT) members, and four student leaders provide valuable insights into how learner behaviour, leadership, and academic performance are interconnected.

Teacher 1 and Teacher 2 both emphasized that disruptive behaviour negatively affects the learning environment, reducing the ability of all students to focus and perform well. As they pointed out, the academic performance of learners is significantly impacted when disruptions are frequent. SMT Member 1 and SMT Member 2 also acknowledged that the management of learner behaviour through clear expectations and consistent enforcement of rules is critical to ensuring a conducive learning environment. The impact of negative behaviour on academic performance supports existing research which indicates that learner behaviour directly affects not only individual academic outcomes but also the overall classroom dynamic (Zee, M., & Koomen, 2016). Student Leader 1 and Student Leader 2 agreed with the teachers and SMT members, highlighting that chaotic classrooms

make learning difficult. For them, well-managed classrooms help them stay focused and motivated. This aligns with the findings of research that underscores the importance of classroom management in enhancing student engagement (Greenberg et al., 2019). When leadership at the school level ensures that rules are followed and that positive behaviour is reinforced, it significantly improves student engagement and academic outcomes.

In terms of leadership strategies, the participants consistently pointed to the importance of strong, proactive leadership in managing classroom dynamics. Teacher 1 and Teacher 2 noted that modelling positive behaviours and setting clear expectations are essential for fostering a respectful and productive learning environment. Similarly, SMT Member 1 and SMT Member 2 emphasized the role of leadership in being consistent, supportive, and actively engaged in shaping the school's discipline policies. The role of leadership in shaping school culture and student behaviour has been well-documented (Day, C., Gu, Q. & Sammons, P., (2016). The findings also emphasized the importance of restorative practices in managing learner behaviour. Both Teacher 1 and Teacher 2 acknowledged that restorative practices, such as restorative circles and peer mediation, are more effective than punitive measures in addressing misbehaviour. Restorative practices help learners reflect on their actions, understand the impact of their behaviour on others, and work towards making amends. This is supported by research which suggests that restorative approaches foster better relationships, accountability, and emotional growth among students, leading to improved behaviour and academic performance (Hulvershorn, K., & Mulholland, S. (2018). The involvement of parents in managing learner behaviour was also seen as a key factor for success. SMT Member 1 and SMT Member 2 emphasized that when parents are engaged, students are more likely to adhere to school discipline policies and achieve better academic results. This supports findings that parental involvement positively influences learner behaviour and academic performance (Ekpenyong, Owan, Mbon & Undie, 2023). Student Leader 3 and Student Leader 4 shared that when parents actively participate in their education and behaviour management, they feel more accountable for their actions, which contributes to better performance. Their views reflect the existing body of literature that highlights the important role of parents in supporting both behavioural management and academic achievement.

Finally, the support provided by the Department of Basic Education (DBE) was seen as inadequate by both teachers and students. Teacher 1 and Teacher 2 indicated that although DBE provides guidelines, the practical implementation of these guidelines is often challenging due to a lack of resources and inconsistent support. SMT Member 1 and SMT Member 2 expressed the need for more specialized training and resources to effectively manage learner behaviour. This finding underscores the gap between policy and practice, highlighting the need for greater support from the DBE in terms of training, resources, and practical guidance for teachers and school leaders (Bantwini & Moorosi, 2018)

### **Implications of the study**

The findings of this study have significant implications for school leadership, classroom management, and education policy in South African secondary schools. The strong link between learner behaviour and academic performance highlights the need for proactive, student-centered discipline strategies that foster a positive learning environment. Transformational leadership is crucial, as supportive school leaders who promote respect, engagement, and motivation help students develop responsible behaviour, ultimately enhancing academic outcomes. The study also underscores the importance of restorative justice approaches, which prioritize conflict resolution and accountability over punitive measures like suspension. This approach reduces repeat offenses and strengthens student-teacher relationships. Additionally, teacher training in classroom management including emotional intelligence and behaviour management can minimize disruptions and create a stable learning environment. At the policy level, the Department of Basic Education should establish clear guidelines integrating restorative and instructional discipline strategies, supported by adequate resources and training. Student leadership also plays a key role, as student leaders who promote discipline contribute to a culture of accountability and positive peer influence. Future research should explore how socio-economic factors and policy frameworks mediate leadership strategies and learner behaviour. Further study on distributed leadership models can provide insights into collaborative approaches that enhance discipline and academic success.

In conclusion, this study highlights the significant impact of learner behaviour on academic performance and classroom dynamics. The views of teachers, SMT members, and student leaders demonstrate that effective leadership, clear behavioural expectations, restorative practices, parental involvement, and support from the Department of Basic Education are all critical components in managing learner behaviour and fostering an environment conducive to academic success. The study suggests that schools must adopt a holistic approach to behaviour management, with strong leadership at the helm, to create a positive school culture that prioritizes respect, accountability, and engagement. Furthermore, the findings underline the importance of collaboration between educators, parents, and students in addressing behaviour issues and supporting academic achievement.



Future research should further explore the relationship between leadership strategies and academic outcomes, as well as the role of community involvement in improving learner behaviour. Additionally, there is a need for more comprehensive training for teachers and school leaders to better address complex behavioural issues and effectively implement discipline management strategies.

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