

Structural failures in preventive discipline: Evidence from a mixed-methods study of Malawian schools

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ABSTRACT

Preventive discipline approaches are increasingly promoted as alternatives to punitive responses to learner misconduct, however, their practical application in Malawian secondary schools remains constrained by systematic and structural limitations. Guided by transformational leadership theory and choice theory, this study examined the structural conditions shaping the effectiveness of preventive discipline management strategies. An embedded mixed-methods design was employed, and the target population comprised school management team members, student council leaders, education managers, and learners who had experienced suspension or dismissal. Quantitatively, a sample of 380 participants was drawn from twenty secondary schools using stratified random sampling, with sample size determined by the Yamane formula. Qualitatively, purposive sampling was employed to conduct in-depth interviews to capture lived experiences of disciplinary strategies. Binary logistic regression was applied to survey data, while thematic analysis guided interpretation of interviews. Quantitative data were analyzed using descriptive and binary logistic regression, while qualitative data were examined through thematic analysis. Findings reveal that the limited effectiveness of preventive discipline is strongly linked to systemic constraints rather than a lack of conceptual grounding. Although trauma-informed management received near-universal support (93.7%), it demonstrated no statistically significant influence on behavioural improvement. Equally, study circles were negatively associated with behavioral outcomes, reflecting weak institutional oversight and inadequate structuring. Qualitative evidence further highlights persistent challenges, including limited resource allocation, insufficient professional training, and the absence of coherent supervision frameworks, which collectively undermine the institutionalisation of preventive practices. The study concludes that the limited success of preventive discipline in Malawi stems primarily from structural challenges requiring systemic reform rather than inherent conceptual weaknesses. The study recommends institutionalising preventive discipline through dedicated counseling services, resource allocation, and mandatory teacher training; and strengthening practice by restructuring peer-based initiatives with clear objectives and teacher oversight. Addressing these foundations would enable schools to transition sustainably from punitive responses towards effective preventive discipline management.

Keywords: Choice Theory, Malawi, Preventive Discipline, Secondary Schools, Study Circles, Transformational Leadership, Trauma-Informed Management

I. INTRODUCTION

Preventive management strategies have increasingly been adopted in secondary schools to address the root causes of learner indiscipline. However, despite their growing prominence, the effectiveness of these approaches remains uneven across different educational contexts. The challenge of maintaining school discipline has evolved beyond a local concern into a global issue affecting the entire educational ecosystem, from administrators to learners, often undermining effective teaching and learning processes (Simonsen & Sugai, 2019). Part of the problem may be attributed to institutional and capacity constraints. Mwaniki (2018) observes that many administrators lack the specialised skills needed to effectively manage learner discipline, often leading to interventions that inadvertently worsen the situation. This situation is further complicated by the digital age, where increased exposure to modern media has intensified the complexity of adolescent behaviour, making discipline management more demanding for school leaders (Mishra & Mehta, 2017). These dynamics underscore the critical need not only for appropriate discipline strategies but also for the structural capacity required to implement them effectively.

Globally, there has been a significant shift away from reactive discipline approaches, such as punishment, suspensions, and expulsions, which have been widely criticised for failing to address the underlying causes of learner indiscipline. For adolescent learners in particular, these reactive/punitive strategies fail to address the root causes of

learner indiscipline. The goal of these models is not just to reduce incidents but to foster a climate where academic and social success can actually coexist. In their place, education systems are increasingly adopting proactive frameworks, including social-emotional learning, Positive Behavioural Interventions and Supports, and trauma-informed care, which emphasise prevention, relationship-building, and the cultivation of positive school climates (Hepburn et al., 2021; Sugai & Horner, 2014). These strategies have demonstrated potential in reducing disciplinary incidents while promoting both academic and social development. However, the successful implementation of these preventive strategies is often constrained by systemic and structural limitations within schools.

In Malawi, persistent learner indiscipline, which is manifested through vandalism, classroom disruptions, and expulsions, continues to pose serious challenges to the education system (Zimpita & Sadalaki, 2025; Ministry of Education, 2023). This reality stands in direct conflict with the Education Act of 2014, which prohibits corporal punishment and mandates progressive disciplinary strategies centered on guidance, counseling, and restorative approaches (Malawi Education Act, 2013). Moreover, the successful realization of Malawi Vision 2063 depends heavily on cultivating a resilient and disciplined human capital base (National Planning Commission, 2021). While Malawi Vision 2063 envisions a productive and socio-economically stable youth population, ongoing learner misconduct remains a significant barrier to achieving this national aspiration.

In response, there has been a policy-level shift from punitive, reactive models of discipline toward proactive preventive management strategies in secondary schools. These include trauma-informed management, study circles, and broader positive discipline frameworks designed to address the underlying psychosocial drivers of learner behaviour. Notably, the Ministry of Education has introduced initiatives such as study circles and national discipline management guidelines promoting trauma-informed practices and positive reinforcement (Ministry of Education Science and Technology [MoEST], 2015b). Research reveals that study circles have shown promise in supporting discipline by encouraging self-reflection, vicarious learning, and stronger peer/staff relationships (Mgungwe, 2023). Regular participation in study circles in some schools reduced learner misconduct and helped build self-discipline, trust, and social understanding among learners (Mgungwe, 2023; MoEST, 2015b). This study argues that unless proactive strategies, specifically trauma-informed management, are technically integrated to address the underlying psychosocial root causes of learner misbehaviour, the educational system will struggle to produce the stable citizenry required for national wealth creation.

Despite these progressive policy frameworks, indiscipline in Malawian secondary schools persists, with repeated acts of vandalism and unexpected classroom disruptions undermining the education system (Ministry of Education, 2023; Malawi News Agency, 2024). This situation threatens broader development goals, including the National Education Sector Plan (2020–2030) and Malawi Vision 2063, both of which emphasize building a skilled and resilient human capital base. It also hinders progress toward Sustainable Development Goal 4, which calls for inclusive and equitable quality education. Current reactive and punitive strategies remain insufficient, contributing to low secondary school completion rates; only 22.3% of students completed secondary education in the 2022/2023 academic year, placing Malawi among the lowest in sub-Saharan Africa (Education Management Information System [EMIS], 2023). This context highlights limitations of current learner discipline management. These patterns suggest a critical disconnect between policy intentions and practical outcomes. While preventive discipline frameworks are conceptually sound, their limited effectiveness points to deeper systemic and structural constraints within the education system. Factors such as inadequate resource allocation, limited professional capacity, weak institutional support systems, and inconsistent supervision mechanisms may significantly undermine the institutionalisation of preventive discipline strategies in Malawian secondary schools.

This study forms part of a broader mixed-methods investigation into learner discipline management in Malawian secondary schools. Without empirical evidence to identify which preventive systems effectively address the root drivers of misconduct, schools fail to deliver meaningful results. To address this the present study examine the structural factors influencing the effectiveness of preventive discipline management strategies in Malawian secondary schools. While a related study examines the implementation of preventive discipline management strategies, the present study focuses specifically on the structural constraints affecting their effectiveness.

1.1 Statement of the Problem

The ongoing issues related to learner indiscipline in Malawian secondary schools, marked by repeated acts of vandalism against property, unexpected class disruptions, and the expulsion of unruly students, pose a serious threat to the country's education system (MoEST, 2015; Malawi News Agency, 2025). The situation undermines Malawi's broader development goals, such as the NESP (2020-2030) and Malawi Vision 2063, both of which emphasise the needs for a well-educated, skilled, and resilient human capital base for national growth. It also limits progress towards Sustainable Development Goals (SDGs) No. 4 particularly in achieving inclusive and equitable quality education. Despite the introduction of preventive discipline policies and frameworks, the persistence of indiscipline suggests that these approaches are not being effectively institutionalised. Existing responses remain largely reactive, and where

preventive strategies are adopted, their implementation is often inconsistent and weakly supported. This is reflected in low secondary school completion rates, with only 22.3% of students completing secondary education in the 2022/2023 academic year Education Management Information System (EMIS, 2023). This reveals a critical gap in understanding the structural conditions that shape the effectiveness of preventive discipline strategies. Without addressing systemic constraints such as limited resources, inadequate professional training, and weak institutional support mechanisms, efforts to reform learner discipline are unlikely to achieve sustained positive impact.

1.2 Research Objective

To examine the structural factors influencing the effectiveness of preventive discipline management strategies in secondary schools in Malawi.

II. LITERATURE REVIEW

2.1 Theoretical Review

This study is grounded in Glasser's (1998) choice theory and Bass's (1999) transformational leadership theory. Choice Theory asserts that all human behavior is driven by the desire to satisfy five fundamental psychological needs: belonging, power, freedom, fun, and survival. Glasser (1998) explains that when school activities fail to meet learners' needs for belonging or power in constructive ways, students often seek alternative outlets, which may manifest as disruptive behavior. Within a preventive discipline framework, this perspective underscores the importance of designing school-based interventions that provide constructive and meaningful opportunities for learners to meet these needs. It also highlights that ineffective discipline systems may not necessarily reflect learner defiance, but rather institutional failure to respond to underlying psychosocial drivers of behaviour. Transformational leadership theory complements this psychological perspective by emphasizing the role of school leadership in shaping enabling environments for behavioural change. Bass (1999) argues that effective transformational leaders inspire change by fostering individualized consideration, intellectual stimulation, and a shared vision. In the context of preventive discipline, this suggests that the success of such strategies depends not only on their design but also on the leadership capacity to mobilize resources, build teacher commitment, and institutionalize supportive practices. Together, these theories provide a lens through which preventive discipline practices in Malawian schools can be evaluated, assessing whether they are supported by both psychological insight and leadership capacity to sustain positive behavioral change.

2.2 Empirical Review

Preventive discipline strategies aim to anticipate and avert indiscipline by cultivating supportive, inclusive, and emotionally safe learning environments. Unlike reactive approaches that respond only after misconduct occurs, preventive methods emphasize collaboration, empathy, consistency, and the reinforcement of positive behaviors. Research shows that such strategies promote learners' intrinsic motivation, social competence, self-regulation, and resilience, thereby contributing to sustainable school climates (Osher et al., 2020; Diliberti et al., 2019). In Malawi, preventive strategies align with national education policies that emphasise learner welfare, psychosocial support, and equitable access to quality education (Ministry of Education, 2023). However, emerging evidence suggests that the effectiveness of these strategies is often constrained by systemic and structural challenges within schools. Recent scholarship highlights the value of integrating evidence-based practices, cultural responsiveness, and technology to strengthen preventive discipline (Wilson-Ching & Berger, 2024). Guidance and counseling services, for instance, are recognized as proactive mechanisms for addressing emotional drivers of misbehavior, such as trauma or unmet belonging needs (Dembo, 2024). However, their effectiveness is often limited by structural challenges, including insufficient professional specialization and role ambiguity between teacher-as-counselor and evaluator, which can reduce learner openness.

Trauma-informed approaches further highlight the need to understand learner behaviour as a potential response to adverse experiences. By reframing misconduct as an expression of unmet emotional needs, these approaches promote supportive environments that enhance safety, emotional regulation, and positive behaviour. However, their implementation remains inconsistent due to limited teacher training, resource constraints, and the absence of structured institutional support systems (Crosby et al., 2018). These challenges point to a broader issue of insufficient capacity to translate policy intentions into sustained practice. Peer-led such as study circles, represent another important preventive strategy. Rooted in Bandura's (1977) social learning theory and informed by the African philosophy of communal responsibility, these approaches leverage peer interaction to promote positive behavioural norms. When effectively structured and supervised, study circles can enhance academic engagement, peer accountability, and social development (Mgomezulu, 2016). However, in contexts where supervision is weak, such groups may inadvertently reinforce negative peer behaviours through processes such as deviant peer training (Mgungwe, 2023).

From an implementation science perspective, it is critical to distinguish between the efficacy of preventive discipline strategies under controlled conditions and their effectiveness in real-world school contexts (Jennings, 2019). While many interventions demonstrate strong theoretical and empirical support, the success of preventive strategies in practice depends on key structural drivers, including teacher competency, leadership effectiveness, resource availability, and organizational coherence. In many cases, the failure of preventive discipline strategies is not due to flaws in their design but rather to weaknesses in the systems required to support their implementation.

Overall, the empirical literature suggests that while preventive discipline strategies hold significant promise, their impact is mediated by structural and institutional conditions. This reinforces the need for a systemic analysis of how such factors shape the effectiveness of preventive discipline in Malawian secondary schools, an area that remains underexplored in current research.

III. METHODOLOGY

3.1 Research Design

This study employed a mixed-methods embedded design (Creswell & Creswell, 2018) with quantitative data as the primary method supplemented by qualitative data to explain patterns. The regularly reported cases of learner ill-behaviour, more especially vandalism of school property in Malawian secondary schools, call for continuous research in the drive towards a better solution to create a conducive learning environment and achieve academic performance in secondary schools as well as learners' well-being. Pragmatics believes that truth is what works at the time. According to Creswell (2014), the pragmatic worldview allows researchers to focus on the research problem and to use all available approaches to understand it.

3.2 Study Area

The study was conducted in twenty selected boarding and day secondary schools across two education divisions in Malawi. These divisions were deliberately chosen because they have experienced a notable increase in cases of learner indiscipline, including widespread vandalism of school property in recent years, which occurred in 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 socio-economic conditions but also enabled meaningful insights into the implementation of preventive discipline in environments where challenges of 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 to come up with a total number of 380 participants.

3.4 Sampling and Sample Size

A multi-stage sampling technique was employed to ensure both breadth and depth in the data. Initially, stratified random sampling was used to select schools across different education divisions to ensure a representative quantitative survey. Subsequently, purposive sampling was utilized to identify specific key informants for qualitative interviews, which included education managers, head teachers, and dismissed/suspended learners with direct experience in discipline management.

3.5 Data Collection Tools and Procedure

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



3.6 Data Analysis

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

3.7 Ethical Considerations

Ethical clearance for the study was obtained from the University of Zambia Research Ethics Committee (HSSREC IRB No. 00006464) before data collection. Authorisation to conduct the research in Malawian secondary schools was granted by the relevant education authorities. Participants were volunteers, and informed consent was obtained from all participants.

IV. FINDINGS & DISCUSSION

4.1 Quantitative Results

In this research paper, the independent variables were the preventive discipline management strategies (learners’ decision-making, trauma-informed management, learners’ voice, giving rewards, and study circles), while the dependent variable was learner behavioral improvement. Figure 1 presents participants’ Level of agreement with discipline management strategies as Independent Variable and Its Potential Influence on reduction in learner Indiscipline thus learner behavioural improvement (Dependent Variable).

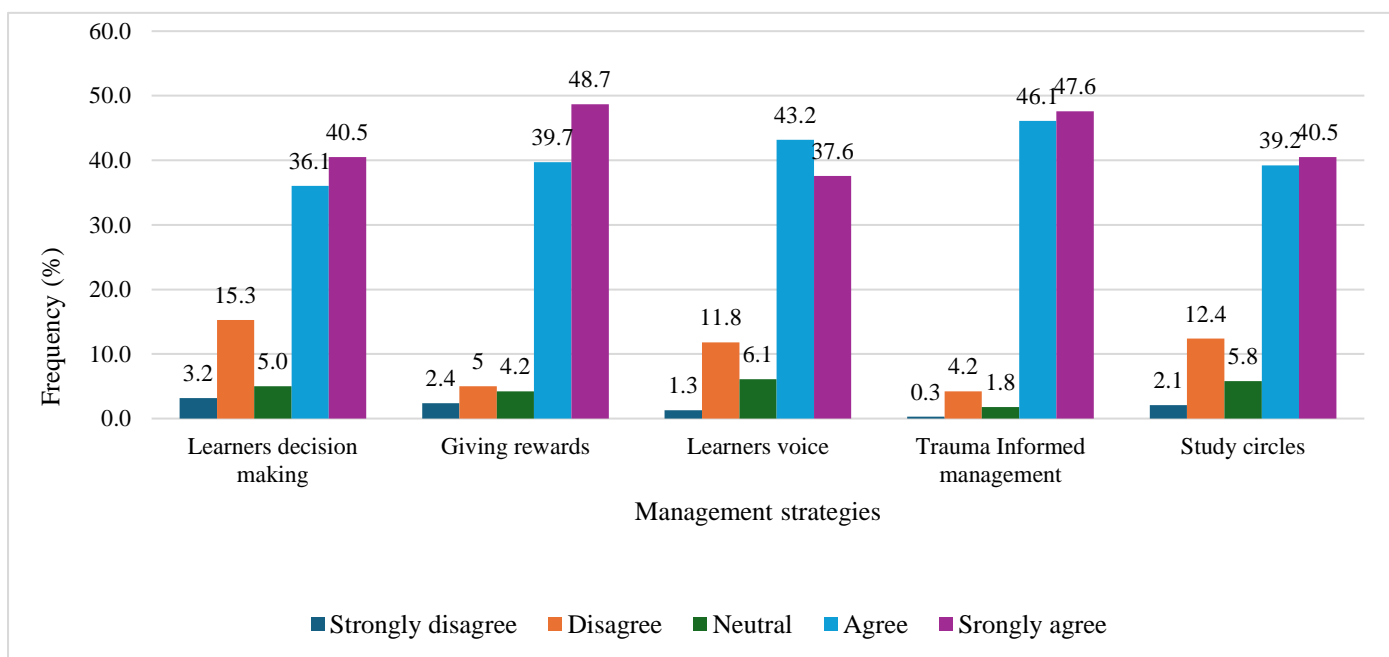


Figure 1
Descriptive Statistics Results Frequency distribution of preventive discipline management strategies

Descriptive analysis revealed a clear hierarchy in stakeholder endorsement of preventive practices. Trauma-informed management received the highest endorsement, with 93.7% of respondents agreeing or strongly agreeing that it can address root causes of learner misbehavior. This was followed by giving rewards (89.2%), learners’ voice (86.4%), information sharing (84.8%), learners’ decision-making (81.5%), and study circles (78.3%). Notably, learners’ decision-making attracted the highest disagreement (10.7%), suggesting reservations among educators about delegating disciplinary authority to learners.

Binary logistic regression examined predictors of behavioural improvement among learners in secondary schools. Table 1 presents regression results.



Table 1
Binary Logistics Regression Results

Variable	B	S.E.	Wald	df	Sig.	Exp(B)
Learners' Decision-Making	0.064	0.093	0.485	1	0.486	1.067
Trauma-Informed Management	0.175	0.116	2.264	1	0.132	1.191
Learners' Voice	-0.064	0.108	0.351	1	0.554	0.938
Giving Rewards	-0.165	0.146	1.285	1	0.257	0.848
Study Circles	-0.211	0.105	4.072	1	0.044*	0.810

*Note= $p < 0.05$; IV: Discipline Management Strategies; DV: Learner Indiscipline Reduction

When tested against behavioral outcomes, trauma-informed management showed a positive but statistically non-significant effect, while study circles demonstrated a significant negative association. These results suggest that although preventive practices are widely endorsed, their actual impact on learner behavior is uneven. The regression analysis revealed that among the preventive practices examined (independent variables), only study circles demonstrated a statistically significant association with the dependent variable, behavioral improvement. However, this association was negative ($B = -0.211$, $p = 0.044$, $Exp(B) = 0.810$), indicating that increased reliance on study circles reduced the odds of improved learner behavior by 19%. In contrast, trauma-informed management showed a positive but non-significant trend ($B = 0.175$, $p = 0.132$, $Exp(B) = 1.191$), suggesting a potential 19% increase in behavioral improvement when applied, though not statistically reliable. The divergence between high endorsement rates and weak or negative effectiveness highlights a critical implementation gap where preventive practices valued by stakeholders do not consistently translate into measurable behavioural improvements.

4.2 Qualitative Results

Thematic analysis of interviews revealed three major themes explaining the quantitative patterns. Table 2 summarises these themes with key concepts and representative verbatim quotations.

Table 2
Summary of Qualitative Themes on Preventive Discipline Practices

Theme	Key Concepts	Representative Verbatim
Structured Support Systems	Recognition, learners' voice, mediation, communication, mutual relationships	"Some learners misbehave because they lack support. When we create a support system, with teachers and even peers involved, they feel cared for and change their behavior" (HT3)
Trauma-Informed Management Skills	Ethical teaching, life skills, morals, social values, understanding learner contexts	"Sometimes the teachers only see the mistake, but they don't see what we are going through. If someone had talked to me first instead of just sending me home, maybe things wouldn't have gotten worse" (D/L2)
Study Circles As Preventive Interventions	Supervised study circles, peer collaboration, academic engagement	"Schools are supposed to conduct study circles, and when they are well handled, study circles are very good strategies that help to minimize misbehavior, more especially when they are supervised by teachers" (HT1)

The following subsections discuss each theme in depth, integrating quantitative findings with qualitative insights and interpreting results through theoretical frameworks. The findings reveal a consistent divergence between stakeholder endorsement of preventive discipline practices and their measurable effectiveness in Malawian secondary schools. While educators, learners, and school leaders express strong support for structured support systems, trauma-informed management, and study circles, quantitative analysis demonstrates that these practices often fail to produce significant improvements in learner behavior. This gap underscores the critical importance of implementation fidelity: preventive strategies cannot succeed through endorsement alone but require systematic application, adequate resources, and institutional commitment.

4.3 Structured Support Systems as Preventive Interventions

Despite strong endorsement for giving rewards (89.2%) and learners' voice (86.4%), regression analysis showed negative, non-significant associations with behavioural improvement, suggesting that implementation challenges undermine theoretical effectiveness of these preventive strategies. This finding aligns with Tshimilandou (2024), who found that positive reinforcement systems only produce sustained discipline outcomes when consistently implemented with clear criteria and institutional commitment. Similarly, Ndlovu et.al, (2023) argue that emotional and social reinforcements require systematic application to sustain long-term behavioural change. These findings indicate a critical disconnect between policy endorsement and practical implementation, where educators conceptually support democratic

and supportive approaches but remain hesitant to fully institutionalize them due to concerns about maintaining order and authority within school systems.

Qualitative data further illuminate this gap, revealing that while schools value supportive approaches, they lack structured systems for consistent implementation. Participants emphasised the importance of creating supportive environments where learners feel supported and valued. One head teacher explained: *“Some learners misbehave because they lack support. When we create a support system, with teachers and even peers involved, they feel cared for and change their behaviour”* 12/05/2025 (HT3). This perspective aligns with Glasser's (1998) choice theory, which posits that misbehaviour often stems from unmet psychological needs for belonging and recognition. When schools create support systems addressing these needs, learners are less likely to seek belonging through negative behaviours. An education manager similarly emphasised proactive engagement over punishment: *“Instead of rushing to punish learners, we need to understand our learners, sit them down, listen to their issues, and learn to resolve issues peacefully. When a school creates time for the learners, some manifestation of misbehaviour among learners can be minimised”* 29/04/2025 (EDM1). This approach reflects what Makendano & Mhlanga (2021) describe as early identification and support mechanisms essential to proactive discipline management. United Nations Scientific, Environmental, Scientific and Cultural Organization [UNESCO] and African Centre for School Leadership (ACSL, 2025) similarly advocates whole-school approaches promoting active engagement of the entire education community in preventing behavioural problems.

Learners corroborated the need for balanced recognition rather than exclusive focus on misbehaviour. One suspended learner noted that most of the time, teachers just see bad things among learners; no wonder learners get punished and even suspended at school. They further expressed that if teachers have time to look at good things among learners and encourage them to keep it up, misbehaviours can be prevented. This observation supports Belle's (2017) argument that positive reinforcement through praise and recognition strengthens desirable behaviours by enhancing learners' sense of competence and belonging. Behaviours that receive positive recognition are more likely to be repeated, while exclusive focus on punishment fails to teach alternative positive behaviours.

Communication competencies emerged as a critical dimension of structured support. The study established that teachers who demonstrate patience, clarity, and empathy in their communication are the ones who can prevent misbehaviour. Learners need to be understood, not just imposed on them. A suspended learner illustrated the behavioural impact: *“When a teacher speaks calmly, I listen. But when they shout or insult, I feel like reacting back”* 02/05/2025 (SL1). These findings resonate with Glasser's (1998) assertion that when authority figures threaten learners' needs for freedom and power through aggressive communication, defensive or aggressive responses are triggered. Conversely, calm and respectful communication satisfies belonging needs and reduces motivation for misbehaviour. These findings illustrate how microsystem interactions between teachers and learners directly shape behavioural outcomes. When the school microsystem provides recognition, respectful communication, and emotional support, learners' developmental needs are met constructively. However, the gap between endorsement and statistical effectiveness suggests that macro system factors, including policy mandates, limited professional training, and resource allocation, undermine effective practice at the school level. Although the Education Act (2013) mandates positive discipline approaches, the absence of adequate institutional support mechanisms limits their operationalization. As a result, structured support systems remain conceptually endorsed but practically underdeveloped, reducing their overall effectiveness as preventive interventions.

4.4 Trauma-Informed Management Skills as Preventive Interventions

Trauma-informed management received the highest endorsement at 93.7%, yet regression analysis showed only a non-significant positive association with behavioural improvement ($\text{Exp}(B)=1.191$, $p=0.132$). This finding reflects what Brunzell (2022) describes as a persistent gap between recognising the value of trauma-informed care and systematically embedding it within school practice. Similarly, Phifer and Hull (2016) note that although educators increasingly acknowledge trauma's impact on learner behaviour, translating this awareness into consistent classroom practice remains constrained by limited training and competing professional demands. This discrepancy suggests that management in Malawian secondary schools is conceptually endorsed but not institutionally embedded, rendering it more aspirational than operational.

Qualitative findings reinforce this interpretation, revealing that trauma-informed are often applied reactively after crises rather than preventively. One dismissed learner reflected, *“Sometimes the teachers only see the mistake, but they don't see what we are going through. If someone had talked to me first instead of just sending me home, maybe things wouldn't have gotten worse. I feel sorry for myself that I lost a chance of being at that good boarding school in Malawi* 04/05/ (D/L2). This account illustrates Brunzell's (2022) argument that trauma-informed education requires a proactive pedagogical shift in which schools function as healing environment before misconduct occurs, not merely reactive crisis intervention after a behavioral incident. A suspended learner contrasted punitive and empathetic responses: *“When they shout at me, I shut down. But when the counsellor asked me what was happening in my life, I felt understood. It helped me calm down and think before reacting”* 02/05/2025 (S/L1). From the Choice Theory

perspective (Glasser, 1998), this response demonstrates that when educators satisfy learners' fundamental needs for belonging and understanding, defensive reactions are reduced. Learners sometimes feel rejected by teachers at the time they need their support. It is the duty of educators to try to satisfy learners' needs to minimise the trauma-related manifestations of misbehaviours. These findings reinforce the view that learner misbehaviour is not solely an individual problem, but a shared systemic issue requiring collective responsibility among school stakeholders.

Learners also emphasised the importance of understanding their home and social context. One participant stated *"I wish the school could understand that some behaviours come from problems at home... If they helped us talk about our feelings, maybe we wouldn't repeat the same mistakes"* 04/05/2025 (D/L1). This sentiment aligns with Bronfenbrenner's (1979) ecological systems theory, which emphasises that learner behaviour cannot be understood apart from home and community contexts. Effective intervention requires mesosystem connections between school and home, with teachers understanding how family stressors manifest in classroom behaviour (Crosby et al., 2018). Further, relational trust emerged as a key motivator for positive behaviour; learners expect teachers to respect them, and they take responsibility not to disappoint their teachers. This reciprocal accountability reflects what Bass and Riggio (2006) describe as individualised consideration in transformational leadership, where leaders attend to individual needs and create mutual commitment. Musaiwa et.al, (2022) found that Malawian head teachers who demonstrate empathetic leadership cultivate school climates where learners feel valued and invested in maintaining positive behaviour. This suggests that both educators and learners have a responsibility to maintain a conducive school environment through the avoidance of misbehaviour manifestation.

Participants emphasised ethical modelling and values transmission. Participants noted that if teachers live ethically, learners copy that, just because discipline is more about what teachers do than what they say. *"Some of our teachers are not professional, especially these young teachers"* 30/04/2025 (HT1). Another head teacher emphasised the importance of having values: *"When you put in values in the students, and they get those values, and they own those values, misbehaving would be reduced"* 06/05/2025 (HT4). These perspectives reveal that learners acquire behaviours through observation and modeling. When teachers model emotional regulation, ethical conduct, and respectful communication, learners internalise these behaviours. Mahaye (2024) extends this argument within African contexts, emphasising that Ubuntu-oriented ethical leadership proactively addresses behavioural challenges by modelling communal values and mutual responsibility. This suggests that trauma-informed education requires a proactive pedagogical shift where schools become healing spaces before misconduct occurs.

The non-significant regression result, despite high endorsement, reflects several structural barriers identified in the literature. Valosek et al. (2019) found that teachers support trauma-informed care conceptually but lack specialised training to recognise trauma-related behaviours or respond therapeutically. Additionally, the role conflict where teachers serve dual functions as instructors and counsellors creates what Crosby et al. (2018) describe as ethical dilemmas undermining therapeutic trust. Learners may fear that disclosing trauma to teachers could affect academic evaluations or be shared inappropriately. In Malawian secondary schools, the absence of dedicated counselling personnel means that trauma-informed practice depends on individual teacher disposition rather than systematic institutional capacity.

Addressing these structural gaps is essential for enhancing the effectiveness of trauma-informed interventions. Strengthening institutional capacity through specialized counsellors, targeted teacher training, and proactive screening mechanisms could significantly improve behavioural outcomes. This aligns with evidence from Phifer and Hull (2016) that even partial implementation of trauma-sensitive practices reduces behavioural incidents. Within the framework of Malawi Vision 2063, such proactive interventions are essential for the "Human Capital Development" pillar, as they move beyond punitive measures to foster the emotional resilience and cognitive stability required for a productive citizenry. Strengthening systematic implementation, through dedicated counsellors, intensive teacher training on trauma management, and proactive screening protocols, would align school disciplinary practices with the national goal of creating a socio-economically stable youth population capable of driving the 2063 developmental agenda.

4.5 Study Circles as Preventive Interventions

Study circles produced the most striking finding in this study. Although 78.3% of respondents endorsed them as effective preventive interventions, regression analysis revealed a statistically significant negative association with behavioural improvement. This paradox, where educators perceive value, but statistical analysis predicts behavioural decline, directly contradicts the theoretical promise of peer-based interventions documented by Mgungwe (2023). However, this contradiction becomes more understandable when examined through the lens of implementation conditions. Qualitative findings indicate that study circles are frequently conducted without adequate supervision, structure, or infrastructure. One head teacher explained, *"Study circles are a very good initiative for preventing learner misbehaviours. But what is needed is teamwork among members of staff in supervising learners. In this school, due to limited infrastructure, we rarely conduct study circles during the rainy season"* 12/05/2025 (HT3). These findings highlight a critical distinction between structures and unstructured peer interventions. According to Osher et al. (2020) unsupervised peer group interactions may lead to deviant peer training, where learners reinforce antisocial behaviours

rather than correcting them. In such contexts, group dynamics may shift toward misbehaviour as a means of achieving social status, excitement, or belonging. The negative regression coefficient suggests that this dynamic may be prevalent in the current implementation of study circles in Malawian secondary schools. The negative regression coefficient suggests this dynamic may be prevalent in Malawian study circles.

Glasser's (1998) Choice Theory further provides insight into this paradox that all behaviour represents choices aimed at satisfying five basic needs: survival, belonging, power, freedom, and fun. Structured study circles with clear objectives allow learners to satisfy power needs through demonstrated competence and belonging needs through peer connection within constructive activity. Conversely, unstructured circles may lead learners to satisfy freedom and fun needs through misbehaviour, which yields higher immediate peer approval than sustained academic engagement. These findings suggest that in their current form, study circles may function as unregulated social spaces rather than structured learning environments. When key conditions such as supervision, continuity, and clear objectives are absent, cooperative learning strategies may not only fail to produce positive outcomes but also unintentionally contribute to misbehaviour.

Structural constraints further exacerbate these challenges. Limited infrastructure, inconsistent scheduling (particularly during adverse weather conditions), and insufficient staffing disrupt the continuity required to establish positive group norms and peer accountability. As Mgungwe (2023) notes, sustained engagement is essential for building trust and enabling positive peer influence; sporadic implementation undermines these relational foundations. From a leadership perspective, the effectiveness of study circles is also contingent upon institutional capacity and direction. Transformational Leadership Theory suggests that school leaders play a critical role in providing vision, support, and capacity-building for innovative practices. Effective implementation requires leaders who can articulate the value of study circles, train teachers in cooperative learning facilitation, and provide ongoing support to address contextual challenges. In the absence of such leadership and structural support, study circles risk becoming what participants described as unsupervised holding spaces, rather than purposeful preventive interventions. This finding reinforces the broader argument of this study: that the effectiveness of preventive discipline strategies is not determined solely by their conceptual strength but by the systemic and institutional conditions under which they are implemented.

V. CONCLUSION & RECOMMENDATIONS

5.1 Conclusion

This study concludes that a significant implementation gap exists between the policy endorsement of proactive discipline and its practical effectiveness in Malawian secondary schools. Although there is a clear ideological alignment with non-punitive and preventive frameworks, a profound disconnect remains between professional endorsement and measurable behavioural outcomes. The findings demonstrate that the shift toward proactive discipline in Malawi remains largely aspirational rather than operational. Preventive strategies, such as structured support systems, trauma-informed management, and study circles, are conceptually sound and widely supported by educators. However, their effectiveness is constrained by systemic and structural limitations, including inadequate professional training, limited institutional capacity, insufficient supervision, and resource constraints.

This study therefore argues that improving learner discipline is not primarily a question of introducing new interventions, but rather of strengthening the systems that support their implementation. Without deliberate investment in teacher capacity, institutional support mechanisms, and structured implementation frameworks, preventive strategies will continue to produce inconsistent or unintended outcomes. The transition toward proactive discipline in Malawi remains more aspirational than operational. For these strategies to effectively address the root causes of learner misbehaviour, the educational system must move beyond conceptual awareness. This requires a deliberate investment in teacher capacity-building and the establishment of robust, supervised frameworks that ensure proactive measures are implemented with the pedagogical precision necessary to support the human capital goals of Malawi Vision 2063. The practical applications are substantial. Schools cannot expect preventive practices to work through endorsement alone; effectiveness implementation fidelity, professional competence, and organizational coherence. Improvement of these practices is vital for sustainable learner discipline and ultimately for learners' educational success, emotional well-being, and positive development.

5.2 Recommendations

Based on these findings, several recommendations emerged for policy: the Ministry of Education should establish dedicated school counselling services, this would help address the current over-reliance on teachers who often lack specialised training in trauma-informed care. The Ministry should also invest in study circle infrastructure, and mandate comprehensive teacher training in trauma recognition and cooperative learning facilitation. For practice, schools should restructure study circles with mandatory teacher supervision and clear objectives and systematise trauma-informed management through proactive approaches rather than reactive crisis intervention. For future research, longitudinal designs should examine systematically implemented practices, and experimental studies should identify

conditions under which peer interventions succeed or fail. Prevention emerges as not only preferable but realistically achievable when schools receive appropriate professional and structural reinforcement. The broader contribution demonstrates that implementation fidelity, not merely intervention selection, determines success in creating safe, supportive learning environments where all learners can thrive.

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