

## **Implementing positive discipline in Eswatini primary schools: A qualitative study of principals' experiences**

**Goodness Tshabalala**

*Central University of Technology, South Africa and University of Eswatini, Eswatini*

**Mkhumbulo Ndlovu**

*Central University of Technology, South Africa and Eswatini Medical Christian University, Eswatini*

**Solomon Makola and Gawie Schlebusch**

*Central University of Technology, South Africa*

This research explored the experiences of primary school principals in Eswatini (formerly Swaziland) regarding the implementation of positive discipline in their schools. The primary focus of the study was to understand how principals experienced the process of implementing positive discipline. Data were collected from interviews with a convenience sample of five principals from five primary schools. Our findings revealed varied experiences among principals when it came to implementing positive discipline in their schools. Based on the narratives provided by the principals, three significant conclusions were drawn, with implications for the theoretical understanding of the implementation of positive discipline in schools: (1) a clear comprehension of positive discipline as a disciplinary measure; (2) the necessity for extensive stakeholder sensitisation regarding positive discipline; and (3) the importance of adopting a whole school approach to positive discipline implementation. We concluded that principals face challenges in fully embracing and effectively implementing positive discipline in their schools. Therefore, continuous and appropriate in-service training and support are essential to assist principals in fully adopting positive discipline as a disciplinary approach in their schools.

### **Introduction**

The global introduction of positive discipline was driven by the human rights agenda, aiming to protect children from various forms of abuse ensuing from corporal punishment. The United Nations played a crucial role in promoting children's rights worldwide, encouraging nations to implement strategies to safeguard these rights, as outlined in the *United Nations Convention on the Rights of the Child* in 1989.

In Eswatini (formerly Swaziland), corporal punishment was banned and criminalised in 2015 by the Ministry of Education and Training, in line with the requirements of the Education and Training Sector Policy of 2011. The then government of Swaziland directed all educational institutions to adopt a positive discipline approach and reject corporal punishment, which is considered inhumane and violent when dealing with school learners (Mabuza et al., 2018).

Positive discipline is founded on principles such as human rights, common respect between teachers and learners, developing positive relationships, promoting participation and cooperation, and protecting learners' self-esteem (Schlebusch et al., 2022). Nigrini (2016) highlights that the focus of discipline is not merely to control undesirable behaviour in the short-term, but to invest in a child's long-term development through efforts that promote

responsibility and self-discipline. This is accomplished by modelling positive behaviour, establishing clear and positively framed limits and rules that are consistently required. The philosophical orientation of positive discipline is based on three main principles, as outlined by Hassan (2019):

- *Preventive discipline*  
This approach is concerned with using the curriculum and instructional approaches to proactively prevent learners from developing abnormal behaviours. It also includes advancing learner involvement in establishing classroom ground rules and determining procedures and processes for such involvement. A positive discipline-oriented teacher functions as a role model for respecting others, demonstrating politeness, and displaying good manners that learners are expected to follow.
- *Supportive discipline*  
This approach intends to foster learners' self-control and self-responsibility. The teacher constantly observes learners' behaviour and provides reassuring feedback to induce them to perform well. Positive behaviours are reinforced within a welcoming and encouraging environment.
- *Corrective discipline*  
In this approach, the educator intervenes when misconduct is observed, with the goal of positively redirecting the learner's behaviour. Learners are given the opportunity to make choices regarding the consequences of their actions.

## **Perceptions of positive discipline**

Positive discipline is seen as a developing alternative to corporal punishment, although sentiments are varied. Bowling (2018) indicates that while several studies have confirmed the positive effect of positive discipline on schoolwide behaviour, some teachers and education stakeholders hold negative opinions about its effectiveness in their schools.

### **Positive perceptions**

A study conducted in Eswatini by Mabuza et al. (2017) indicated that teachers considered positive discipline as an effective approach for disciplining learners. They stated that positive discipline effectively improves learners' behaviour without causing physical harm. The study further claimed that this type of discipline contributes towards fostering responsible learners. Similarly, a study carried out in the United States of America by Roberts-Clawson (2017) also confirmed that positive discipline had successfully reduced negative learner behaviour. Learners were reported to display more positive and less negative behaviours inside and outside the classroom, which assisted them to grow academically, and in turn, assisted in nurturing the school climate.

A study conducted in Iran by Somayeh et al (2013) revealed that implementing positive discipline in the classroom led to the internalisation of values, a decline in disruptive behaviour, and the advancement of self-control among learners. Therefore, positive

discipline is viewed as an effective strategy for promoting good learner behaviour and cultivating a culture of responsibility in learners. Positive discipline is also considered to be both a preventive and supportive approach. Tshewang (2022) stated that effective implementation of positive discipline can effectively deter disruptive behaviour that has the potential to disturb the classroom atmosphere. The approach also comprises supportive techniques, where non-punitive mediations are used to assist learners who demonstrate behaviour problems that could lead to indiscipline in the classroom.

### **Negative perceptions**

Mabuza et al. (2017) observed that some teachers in Eswatini regarded the implementation of positive discipline as not viable within an African cultural context. Participants in the study indicated that positive discipline does not align well with their culture, where traditional approaches of corporal punishment are frequently used to curb indiscipline in children. Makewa et al. (2017) reasoned that some parents consider the abolition of corporal punishment as a Western-type view that may lead to moral degeneration in African cultures. This reveals that positive discipline is perceived as an external approach that has not been personalised to align with African principles and morals, making it less compliant and possibly detrimental to the moral foundations of African cultures. A study in the African context by Yeboah (2020) indicates that many teachers in Ghana do not endorse the initiative to eliminate corporal punishment in Ghanaian schools. Instead, they advocate for the continuation of corporal punishment, provided it is administered by teachers in a manner that avoids causing harm to learners.

Roberts-Clawson (2017) indicated that positive discipline is not always perceived as a strategy that adequately prepare learners for the real world, which aligns with Mabuza et al. (2017)'s observation that positive discipline lacks relevance in general disciplinary applications. Thus, positive discipline is seen by some as a superficial approach that does not necessarily align with the disciplinary systems applied in the wider society. Predescu and Darjan (2017) point out that the resistance against positive discipline is possibly due to the introduction through a top-down approach, indicating that it is viewed by some as an imposition by those in authority.

### **Principals' experiences with positive discipline**

The introduction of positive discipline in schools has resulted in a diverse range of experiences for principals, teachers, and learners. While some experiences have been positive, the majority have been negative in nature, depicting the challenges associated with positive discipline. Ndlovu et al (2023) state that positive discipline has yielded positive outcomes in schools. For instance, the number of suspensions decreased significantly, vandalism reduced, and teachers reported improvements in the classroom atmosphere, behaviour, attitudes, and academic performance of learners. Tartari (2018) also reported positive experiences, asserting that positive discipline enhances the quality of learning experiences, increases learners' educational engagement, and promotes academic success. A positive learning environment leads to learner motivation and growth academically, socially, and emotionally.

On the contrary, Schlebusch et al. (2022) found that principals and teachers in Mpumalanga province, South Africa, encountered difficulties in implementing positive discipline due to their lack of understanding its techniques and inadequate training on the approach. This lack of knowledge has resulted in ineffective disciplinary mechanisms, such as suspensions and time-outs, which adversely affect learner achievement (Rodriguez & Welsh, 2022). Sibanda and Mpofu (2017) revealed that some teachers in Zimbabwe failed to be ideal role models, engaging in socially unacceptable behaviour in the presence of learners. In South Africa, Coetzee and Mienie (2013) observed that teachers find it challenging to incorporate human rights in their curriculum due to inadequate teaching time and the lack of a standard curriculum on human rights. A lack of coordination between home and school disciplinary practices hampers the successful implementation of positive discipline, resulting in the dilution of the school's efforts (Schlebusch et al., 2022).

## **Strategies for implementing positive discipline**

The positive discipline approach primarily relies on preventive and proactive strategies that aim to instil lifelong prosocial behavioural skills and values. When addressing misconduct, thoughtfully selected corrective methods are employed to uphold the dignity of the learner (Sibanda & Mathwasa, 2020).

### **Proactive techniques**

According to Coetzee and Mienie (2013), positive discipline emphasises a preventive rather than punitive approach, requiring discipline to be proactive rather than reactive. This entails emphasising supportive behaviours, including mutual respect, teaching, effective communication, collegial planning, self-discipline, modelling, encouragement, and motivation (Muthmainnah, 2021).

#### *Creating a positive classroom climate*

Effective classroom management establishes a conducive positive discipline environment (CJCP & DBE, 2012). This environment advances a culture where learners feel they belong and where shared respect, tolerance, dignity, interaction, and orderliness are fundamental aspects (Segalo & Rambuda, 2014). Respecting the dignity of each learner involves recognising and appreciating their individuality, cultural background, language, religion, gender, and age (Prins et al., 2019). CJCP and DBE (2012) stressed the importance of creating opportunities for discussions about and understanding of the differences among learners, promoting an appreciation for diversity, and respecting different opinions.

#### *Teaching*

A fundamental pillar of positive discipline is the promotion of human rights. Coetzee and Mienie (2013) asserted that teachers are legally required to support and advocate for human rights through teaching. This involves educating learners about their human rights, the code of behaviour, classroom regulations, self-control, and protocols, while also instilling social and emotional competencies. Huth (2015) outlined the disciplinary teaching approach through the four Cs of classroom management: Commendation, Communication, Consistency, and Content. By applying these concepts, teachers show learners the

anticipated standards through clear communication of both behavioural and academic expectations (Sieberer-Nagler, 2016).

### *Modelling*

Modelling positive behaviour is based on Bandura's observational learning theory, which suggests that learners develop behavioural patterns by observing others (Sibanda & Mathwasa, 2020). Observational learning is considered an effective way for learners to master attitudes, values, knowledge, skills, competencies, strategies, beliefs, thoughts, and feelings (Sibanda & Mathwasa, 2020). The survival and continuity of any culture relies on role models effectively portraying norms and values through their daily interactions with other group members (Prins et al., 2019). In a classroom setting, teachers should serve as models of positive behaviour that learners can emulate. Belle (2016) emphasised that teachers and principals should exemplify desirable behaviour, demonstrating traits such as honesty, trustworthiness, respect, integrity, and kindness. When teachers show respect, learners feel valued and empowered, leading them to reciprocate the same respect to others within the school community (Belle, 2016). This strategy underscores the importance of teachers modelling positive behaviour, including kindness, patience, and tolerance, which they expect from their students.

### *Motivation*

Motivation is the driving force that directs behaviour towards a particular direction (Prins et al., 2019). It provides learners with direction and helps them choose specific behaviours (Belle, 2016). Teachers have a responsibility to inspire learners to display constructive actions while also fostering within them an inherent capability to shape their conduct to align with appropriate behaviours that honour individual integrity, human rights, and the respect of others' dignity. Positive discipline possesses an educational and motivational essence, granting learners the capacity to self-inspire toward socially beneficial behaviours (Ndlovu et al. 2023).

Encouragement and praise are effective avenues for fostering motivation. Ntuli and Machaisa (2013) underlined the significance of praising learners for their positive conduct and motivating them to adhere to the directives of school authorities. Commending learners for their appropriate behaviour serves as a catalyst, inspiring them to model their actions on positive reinforcement and cultivating their self-control. This perspective was shared by Obadire and Sinthumule (2021), who concurred that bestowing rewards and commendations upon well-behaved learners serves as a driving force for them to consistently uphold school regulations. Learners who derive satisfaction from the educational experience are more inclined to manifest favourable behaviour, given that their focus is mainly directed towards their academic activities. Ntuli (2012) identified two essential objectives for motivating learners within the context of teaching and learning: firstly, to enhance their willingness to invest effort in learning, and secondly, to structure instructional content and activities in manners that facilitate their comprehension. Teachers should offer commendations for exceptional performance and acknowledge outstanding achievements in academics and sports through appropriate rewards.

### *Self-discipline*

The proactive orientation of the positive discipline strategy aims to nurture learners with enduring principles that empower them to exercise self-control. Ultimately, learners should possess the capacity to independently detect appropriate behaviour and cultivate harmonious interactions with individuals from varied backgrounds, without specific guidance. Such is the hallmark of the positive discipline approach (Shaikhnag & Assan, 2014). The teacher bears the duty of shaping learners to a stage where self-discipline becomes embedded, governing their adherence to school rules and societal norms. However, prior to teachers embarking on the endeavour to instil this attribute in learners, Tauatswala (2018) contends that the process must initiate with the teachers themselves. He advocates that educators should epitomise a significant level of self-discipline and compliance with regulations.

### **Corrective techniques**

Corrective techniques are applied in the event learners display unbecoming behaviours associated with violation of school rules and regulations. Coetzee and Mienie (2013) underscored the fact that corrective discipline meted out within a positive discipline regime is rights-based and non-violent. It focuses on correcting stray behaviour with dignity, guiding learners to understand their own behaviour, and enabling them to perceive the impact of their actions on the holistic well-being of others. CJCP and DBE (2012) asserted that upon need, positive discipline includes non-violent consequences for wrong behaviour. It utilises non-humiliating consequences with the intent to assist learners identify alternative and preferred behaviours and ensure that learners amend the harm caused to others or the environment (CJCP & DBE, 2012).

### *Counselling*

Counselling is talking therapy involving a counsellor and client whose aim is to empower the latter to be able to deal with personal challenges. In a school, counselling is conducted to understand more about the learner and also help the learner develop the means to work towards overcoming behaviour problems. According to CJCP and DBE (2012), positive discipline encourages teachers to talk to learners on an individual basis to understand their backgrounds and the issues and challenges confronting them. Understanding the context and circumstances that shape learners' behavioural tendencies will assist in mapping out appropriate solutions to the behaviour challenges and avoid arriving at irrational conclusions about the learner (CJCP & DBE, 2012). Mabea (2013) contended that teachers can use counselling to identify mistaken goals, and faulty logic in the minds of learners and closely work towards dealing with the associated faulty behaviours.

### *Handling mistakes*

In the event learners make a mistake, the teacher should not overreact, but find a calm and orderly way of handling mistakes that will not humiliate the learner. Sieberer-Nagler (2016) contended that errors are a natural part of the learning process. In addition, CJCP and DBE (2012) stated that periodically, children make immature decisions and should therefore be given the opportunity to learn from their mistakes through supportive assistance from the teacher. According to Prins et al (2019), teachers have a duty to maintain discipline in the

classroom, correct behavioural problems that arise, and redirect conduct in the absence of expected behaviour. CJCP and DBE (2012) stated that teachers should ask questions to establish why children misbehaved or failed to complete their work and then listen attentively to their explanations. Solutions are then generated based on an informed knowledge of the situation that surrounds the learners.

#### *Withholding and withdrawal of privileges*

According to Singo (2017), withholding and withdrawal of privileges refer to intentionally depriving someone of a reward as a symbolic disapproval of undesirable behaviour. Simatwa (2012) added that this disciplinary technique, such as demoting students in leadership positions, was commonly used to address significant forms of student behaviour problems. However, this approach may not be suitable for learners not in leadership positions as they would not suffer demotion even if they committed similar offenses to their counterparts in leadership. In some cases, learners may be given a time-out. Within the positive discipline approach, time-out is used for learners who need a break or some time alone to cool off in an overwhelming classroom environment. Care must be taken to ensure the learner is placed in a comfortable space during the time-out, and upon rejoining the class, they should not feel left out or humiliated.

#### *Parental involvement*

More serious offenses may require parental involvement. Prioritising greater parental involvement in both disciplinary and academic matters is crucial for fostering a supportive educational environment (Carroll, 2022). According to CJCP and DBE (2012), the positive discipline approach works best when there is communication between parents and teachers and a similarity in disciplinary approaches between the school and home environments. As a disciplinary measure, teachers may approach parents, typically through the principal's office, to seek their cooperation in addressing a learner's deviant behaviour. Learners are more likely to cooperate with disciplinary efforts when both teachers and parents work together collaboratively. Ntuli (2012) attested to this, stating that a partnership between parents and teachers can produce more effective results in shaping learners' behaviour than when either party tackles the issue alone. Nene (2013) similarly contends that an active partnership between parents and schools has positive outcomes, as parents have a powerful influence on children's behaviour.

Newman et al (2019) mentioned Epstein's (2007) model of parental involvement, which emphasises continuous exchange of ideas between parents and the school on parenting styles and communication methods that align with each other's expectations. Children who feel rejected may demonstrate aggression, dependency, or a defensive aggressive attitude, suffer from low self-esteem, and develop a negative worldview. In addition, they may deny their need for support, encouragement, sympathy, love, and other positive responses due to the negative outcomes associated with rejection. Furthermore, individuals who perceive discipline strategies from their parents and teachers as irrational and unfair are less likely to internalise the intended message of a teacher in the classroom.

*Multi-stakeholder approach*

Dealing with learner indiscipline requires a multi-stakeholder approach due to its complexities. Tlhapi (2015) stated that discipline in schools should not be solely the responsibility of teachers but should involve all stakeholders. Lumadi (2020) suggested that lasting solutions to learner indiscipline can be achieved through consistency and teamwork. This approach calls for collaboration among policymakers, parents, principals, teachers, and community members, as stated by Obadire and Sinthumule (2021). Engaging the local community in the school's affairs is crucial to address indiscipline issues that may arise from the wider community (Tlhapi, 2015). Obadire and Sinthumule (2021) further argued that involving the Learner Representative Council within the multi-stakeholder strategy can help regulate and address learner disciplinary problems effectively. By doing so, the school creates a positive and conducive environment free of threats and misbehaviour, where learners actively participate in maintaining discipline. According to Tshabalala (2021), thorough involvement and preparation of stakeholders are essential for the effective implementation of any policy.

*Warnings, referrals, hearings, and prosecutions*

In some instances, learners' behaviour problems may escalate beyond the teacher's jurisdiction, necessitating the involvement of the principal's office. When confronted with severe offenses, the school may consider a range of intervention options, including warnings, referrals, hearings, and in extreme cases, prosecutions. The Department of Basic Education in South Africa has established corrective procedures that schools can adopt for learners involved in severe offenses, including those of a criminal nature. Coetzee and Mienie (2013) emphasised that positive discipline does not imply the absence of punishment; instead, it acknowledges that all actions have consequences. Positive discipline aims to provide relevant, proportional, corrective, and rehabilitative disciplinary measures without humiliating or seeking retribution against the offending learner.

The South African Schools Act (South African Government, 1996) outlined provisions for expulsion and suspension in cases of severe disciplinary issues. These measures must be exercised with great caution. Expulsion may be utilised for learners guilty of gross misconduct after a fair disciplinary hearing, while suspension for a period not exceeding five days should only be employed for correction purposes (Shaikhmag & Assan, 2014).

## **Research questions**

Based on the discussion above, our study framed these research questions:

- What are principals' understanding of positive discipline?
- What are the experiences of principals in the implementation of positive discipline in their schools?
- Which strategies are used by principals to implement positive discipline in their schools?



## **Method**

Our study adopts an interpretivism paradigm to gain an in-depth understanding of the participants' experiences regarding positive discipline in schools. The qualitative research design employs a case study approach to explore the experiences of principals in implementing positive discipline. Thematic analysis, specifically content analysis, was employed to analyse the data, presenting the findings through emerging themes.

## **Sampling**

The qualitative research approach used in this study follows a non-probability or purposeful sampling method, which is commonly adopted in qualitative research. Participants were selected based on specific defining characteristics that made them suitable sources of data for the study. Principals were chosen as participants since their roles are highly relevant to the study's focus on discipline in schools. This is consistent with Pahwa et al.'s (2023) suggestion that researchers identify key informants or information-rich groups for a more effective study of phenomena. The non-probability sampling method, including purposive and convenient sampling, was chosen to gain insights into the cases without the need for generalisation to all similar cases.

The study was conducted in the Hhohho region of Eswatini, selected for its numerous reported cases of learners facing discipline problems and its convenient accessibility. The research participants comprised five principals from five primary schools within the region, possessing more than five years of teaching experience, chosen through purposive sampling based on their location.

Data was collected from principals by means of semi-structured individual interviews. The rationale for this was to obtain information-rich data from participants where they were allowed the freedom to express their opinions and views on the phenomenon under study. With the use of semi-structured interviews, clarity could also be sought from participants when needed. Interviews were conducted in English and participants were provided with the data to verify accuracy and alignment with their experiences.

## **Data analysis**

Every interview was transcribed verbatim, and thematic analysis was utilised. Lochmiller (2021) described the purpose of thematic analysis as examining how the provided information pertains to a particular research question or prompts fresh conceptual and theoretical insights. During thematic analysis, researchers create codes and significant themes by thoroughly scrutinising the collected research data in an inductive manner (Neuendorf, 2018).

## **Ethical aspects**

The researchers took ethical considerations seriously to ensure the research adhered to acceptable norms and values. Ethics in research refer to widely accepted moral principles

governing appropriate conduct towards participants (De Vos et al., 2017). Respect for all participants and adherence to ethical principles were integral to the research process. Informed consent was obtained from each participant, with assurances given regarding the principles of autonomy and confidentiality. The participants' safety and right to privacy were prioritised. The researchers clearly communicated the purpose and importance of the research to all participants (Maree, 2020). Participants were provided with voluntary consent forms and informed of their right to withdraw consent at any point without penalty. Anonymity was granted to the participating principals, and pseudonyms were used in reporting the findings to uphold the commitment of confidentiality made to the participants earlier.

Table 1: Profiles of research participants and research sites

Participant pseudonym	Age	Region	School location	School name	Years of experience	Gender	Educational level
PA	54	Manzini	Rural	SA	10	F	Honours
PB	53	Hhohho	Urban	SB	8	M	Degree
PC	59	Manzini	Rural	SC	12	M	Degree
PD	57	Manzini	Urban	SD	11	F	Degree
PE	58	Hhohho	Urban	SE	12	M	Master

The research sites were primary schools ranging between 400 to 600 learners and about 17-20 teachers per school. Approximately 45-50 learners were present in each class.

## Findings

Based on our analysis of the participant data, three themes emerged, namely understanding of positive discipline, experiences of principals in the implementation of positive discipline, and strategies to implement positive discipline in schools.

### Theme 1: Understanding of positive discipline

The participants showed varied ways of understanding positive discipline. To a large extent, participants displayed a lack of understanding and misinformation about the principles and strategies of positive discipline.

Positive discipline is a Western approach to learner discipline where you have fewer numbers in class and cannot be applicable in our context. (Principal C)

Positive discipline is when you reprimand a child for having done something wrong. For example, if a child has done something wrong, you are aware that what he has done is wrong; it does not mean that you condone the behaviour, but you need to come up with strategies to ensure that the child does not repeat the same offence. In this case, you are not using the stick, but you promise a child something that if s/he does well, you will give him or her something good, like a reward or incentive to ensure that s/he continues to do well. In that way, they behave well, voluntarily. (Principal A)

It is an approach that is forced down to schools by the Ministry of Education because of being a signatory in international protocols and treaties. (Principal D)  
Positive discipline focuses on learners and their rights and does not correct negative behaviour, but rather perpetuates it. (Principal E)

School principals exhibited a notably limited understanding of positive discipline. Their answers predominantly portrayed positive discipline as a Western methodology unsuited for local circumstances, thus explaining its lack of efficacy in Eswatini schools. Unfavourable viewpoints towards positive discipline seem to stem from its introduction, which lacked consultation and consensus. Although Principal A demonstrated a relatively better grasp of positive discipline, this viewpoint aligns more with the corrective aspect rather than the proactive-preventive dimension.

## **Theme 2: Experiences of principals in the implementation of positive discipline**

Responses gathered from principals indicated that a wide variety of experiences have been encountered in the implementation of positive discipline in schools. One common observation drawn from these experiences though is that they are not all pleasant. Sharing his experience Principal A said:

Positive discipline does not positively impact the behaviour of learners. Yes, we have been directed to use it in schools, but it is not yielding the expected results. Maybe, as schools, we have not correctly grasped it and still need further training in it. We try detention and suspension measures but believe me, it does not work with most learners. (Principal A)

Teachers in general did not seem to adhere to the abolition of corporal punishment as they do not perceive positive discipline techniques to influence learners' behaviour positively. In addition, teachers ascribed their disapproval of positive discipline to them not being included in the discussion processes when corporal punishment was abolished. Principal C had this to say:

Even though teachers have been made aware that they are not supposed to use corporal punishment, they still use it. They report in meetings that positive discipline is not working for them. Our teachers also indicate that they were left out in the process of ruling out corporal punishment as a form of discipline in schools and did not receive any assistance in the transition process. (Principal C)

The implementation of positive discipline has exacerbated the conduct of learners within many schools. A surge in the most problematic behaviours among learners has been observed after the implementation of positive discipline. It was stated that the effectiveness of positive discipline cannot merely be disregarded as its proponents attest to its merits, and as such a participant conceded that principals' lack of comprehensive training in effectively managing and addressing it among their learners may be a contributing factor. Principal B indicated:

The use of PD has worsened the behaviour of learners in schools. We have since seen the worst behaviours amongst our learners. I cannot say PD does not work because

those who advocate for it say it does. Maybe we have not been well trained on how to handle and deal with it among our learners. .... In fact, it remains unclear to us what to use to discipline learners in the absence of our long traditional method of corporal punishment. (Principal B)

The role of parents was also touched upon by participants. Although parents were informed of the abolishment of corporal punishment in schools, many parents were of the opinion that they should continue with this practice at home. This divide between home and school has a negative effect on discipline at school.

There is a broken thread in this whole thing of learner discipline. Parents want learners to be disciplined through corporal punishment. The Ministry says corporal punishment is a no-go area. There is so much disagreement among the key stakeholders. So, if the learners at home are used to corporal punishment, and when they come here, we talk to them, ahh... chaos! At times we suspend learners; this does not improve their behaviour or their learning; however, it helps in getting the parents' attention. (Principal E)

We are trying as much as possible to comply with the government's educational policies, of which positive discipline is one, but it is not easy. We have sensitised parents. Teachers are doing their best to comply, but there are instances where teachers are tempted to revert to corporal punishment. Parents' voices are also there, advocating for corporal punishment. There is still a need for the Ministry to greatly involve stakeholders in the use of positive discipline for it to be fully embraced by everyone. (Principal D)

Given the above responses, it was observed that PD was paired with experiences of increasing cases of learner indiscipline, lack of training, alienation of teachers in the implementation process, and resistance of parents and some teachers towards the new approach. Some parents and teachers continued to apply corporal punishment as a way of instilling discipline, a rejection of the PD approach.

### **Theme 3: Strategies used to implement positive discipline in schools**

Principals revealed several strategies that they perceive to be positive discipline strategies.

Regular communication with teachers to promote the benefits of positive discipline benefits occur. Such communication is formalised during meetings, particularly when addressing parental concerns related to corporal punishment. Principal A stated:

We try to train and educate teachers on the use of positive discipline. We insist on this form of discipline in almost all our meetings, as sometimes we do receive complaints from parents that teachers use corporal punishment on learners.

Furthermore, a participant highlighted their utilisation of alternative methods for discipline. However, it is worth noting that some of the mentioned measures do not align with the principles of positive discipline. Principal C asserted:

We try to work with learners, teachers, and parents to identify problems that might lead to misbehaviour and try to curb such through rules and regulations. We also use other

disciplinary measures such as instructing them to clean the school yard by picking litter, remaining in during break time, and engaging their parents, depending on the magnitude of the offence.

Building on the previous point, another participant expressed the challenges they encounter while implementing positive discipline. When dealing with teachers and learners who are brought to the office for disciplinary reasons, one approach for a principal involves attempting to comprehend the underlying reasons for the learners' misbehaviour through communication. Once more, certain alternative strategies that were mentioned do not conform to the principles of positive discipline. Principal D specified:

I must acknowledge that the implementation of PD is difficult. As a principal, once a learner is referred to the office, I try to understand why he or she is misbehaving and work with teachers and learners themselves to address the underlying issues. However, as a school, we encourage one another to refrain from the use of corporal punishment and consider other ways, such as cleaning toilets, detention, and other means that teachers may find effective.

Principal B and Principal E both admitted that they were in a continuous learning process while striving to incorporate positive discipline. They were also actively supporting each other as members of their respective staff in their efforts to effectively implement positive discipline. Principal E commented:

As a school, we are not yet there. We still use the stick, but we hope we will eventually get there. However, in the meantime, while we are trying to get there, we make sure we clearly communicate the school's expectations for behaviour and consequences for misbehaviour. We commend positive behaviour to encourage learners to continue behaving well.

The principals' responses highlight various approaches employed to enforce discipline, such as engaging in discussions, utilising reward systems, involving parents, addressing litter aspects, cleaning toilets, assigning detention, and resorting to corporal punishment. Among the principals, a clear grasp of positive discipline strategies was evident through their mention of discussions, rewards, and parental involvement. However, the utilisation of detention, cleaning tasks, and litter pickup reveals a lack of comprehensive understanding of the essence of positive discipline. These latter methods possess punitive characteristics that do not align well with the principles of positive discipline. Encouragingly, it was noted that the principals are cognisant of the prohibition of corporal punishment, although they acknowledge having resorted to it as a final measure when positive discipline was perceived to have faltered.

## **Discussion**

The findings of the study revealed that most participants lacked a proper understanding of positive discipline as a disciplinary measure. They still perceived positive discipline as a Western approach not necessarily suitable in an African context. Additionally, the principals viewed positive discipline as an ineffective disciplinary approach, aligning with the

perspective of Roberts-Clawson (2017), who saw positive discipline as inadequate in preparing learners for the real world. These observations highlight a gap in the participants' understanding of positive discipline, and strategies applied under the guise of positive discipline were in fact found to violate such principles (Schlebusch et al., 2022).

While some principals demonstrated a slightly positive understanding of positive discipline, their comprehension was based on reactive measures, such as reprimands and rewards, rather than preventive strategies that focus on curricular and instructional mechanisms (Hassan, 2019). Our study emphasised that the core of positive discipline revolved around preventive measures, which aim to prevent learners from developing deviant behaviours.

The implementation of positive discipline was acknowledged as challenging by all participants. They faced difficulties due to their lack of knowledge about the approach, the imposition of positive discipline without sufficient stakeholder engagement, and the increasing trends of learner indiscipline following the abolition of corporal punishment. These challenges were in line with the experiences reported by Schlebusch et al. (2022), who observed difficulties faced by teachers in the Mpumalanga province of South Africa due to their inadequate understanding of positive discipline techniques and the lack of meaningful training. This ignorance led to the reliance on ineffective disciplinary mechanisms, such as suspensions and time-outs, instead of embracing positive discipline principles. Furthermore, principals reported that their teachers mistakenly considered various disciplinary strategies as positive discipline, leading to their failure to bring about positive change in learner discipline. Detention and suspension were cited as examples of such strategies, indicating a lack of understanding of what positive discipline truly entails.

Despite principals' efforts to implement positive discipline in schools, some parents still resorted to corporal punishment as a disciplinary method and expected schools to do the same. This observation aligns with the findings of Schlebusch et al. (2022), who pointed out that the lack of a coordinated approach between home and school disciplinary practices hinders the successful implementation of positive discipline, leading to diluted efforts by the school.

While some positive discipline strategies, such as rewards and discussions, were correctly identified by participants, there was a significant knowledge gap regarding other positive discipline techniques, such as teaching and learning classroom involvement, modelling, self-discipline, motivation, multi-stakeholder approach, and creating a positive classroom environment. The limited understanding of positive discipline strategies among principals raises concerns about how effectively this is being implemented in schools, given the wide deficiency in their comprehension of the approach. Positive discipline does not condone any strategy that humiliates or violates the dignity of the learner, such as suspension, detention, or demeaning tasks (Coetzee & Mienie, 2013). In the context of positive discipline, corrective measures should adhere to principles grounded in rights and non-violence. The emphasis lies in steering learners toward comprehending the repercussions of their conduct and rectifying it with respect and dignity. The way discipline is managed within a school exerts substantial influence not only on each individual but also on the broader community. It is disconcerting to discover that certain schools persist in employing corporal

punishment, even in the face of widespread agreement on the adoption of positive discipline practices.

## Conclusion

Based on the findings, one can deduce that school principals in Eswatini possess an inadequate grasp of positive discipline and encounter obstacles in its practical application. The additional hurdle of opposition from certain parents who advocate for corporal punishment further adds to the complexity of effectively implementing positive discipline. Consequently, there exists a pressing requirement for school principals to enhance their comprehension of positive discipline as a disciplinary framework. Furthermore, comprehensive awareness initiatives should be directed toward parents to cultivate their endorsement of positive discipline. Embracing a holistic school-wide approach to implementing positive discipline is also of paramount importance.

To address the challenges identified, the following recommendations are proposed:

- Conduct stakeholder consultations to garner support from key players for the adoption and implementation of positive discipline.
- Develop a context-relevant positive discipline toolkit specifically tailored for Eswatini schools.
- Provide comprehensive training for all stakeholders, including parents, teachers, and principals, on the principles and strategies of positive discipline.
- Establish continuous support and monitoring mechanisms to ensure the successful implementation of positive discipline in schools.

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## Appendix A: Interview schedule

Thank you for agreeing to participate in this study whose purpose is to establish your experience in the implementation of positive discipline in the school. As you know, positive discipline is gaining traction in educational settings. In this study I'm interested in hearing your current understanding of this approach to discipline, your thoughts as well as your experiences in integrating positive discipline into the school's environment.

- Explain your understanding of positive discipline. In your description of positive discipline feel free to describe the principles of positive discipline and how positive discipline differs from traditional methods of discipline?
- What role do encouragement and connection play in positive discipline?
- Which aspects of positive discipline do you find the most appealing or valuable?
- Please share your experiences of the implementation of positive discipline; I know the transition from corporal punishment is not easy for schools.

- Which strategies are you using with the implementation of positive discipline?
- How have teachers experienced the transition process to positive discipline?
- Elaborate on any training received with regards to the implementation of positive discipline.
- What is the contribution of positive discipline towards learner behaviour?
- Anything that you would like to share as part of your experiences in implementing positive discipline?

Thank you for your time.

**Dr Goodness Tshabalala** is a lecturer in the University of Eswatini, Eswatini (formerly Swaziland) and a part time post-doctoral fellow at Central University of Technology, Free State, South Africa. She recently completed her doctorate in Education Management, Leadership and Policy Studies and her research interests include education management, as well as aspects in the broad field of sociology and psychology of education.

ORCID: <https://orcid.org/0009-0003-5157-7563>

Email: [tshabalalagoodness12@gmail.com](mailto:tshabalalagoodness12@gmail.com)

**Dr Mkhumbulo Ndlovu** completed his DEd in Educational Psychology and is currently a post-doctoral fellow at Central University of Technology, Free State, South Africa, and Senior Lecturer in the Department of Psychology at the Eswatini Medical Christian University, Eswatini. His research interests include educational psychology, educational management and quality assurance in education.

ORCID: <https://orcid.org/0009-0006-3376-704X>

Email: [mkprofessor@gmail.com](mailto:mkprofessor@gmail.com)

**Professor Solomon Makola** is an Associate Researcher in the Faculty of Humanities at the Central University of Technology, Free State, South Africa. He received his rating as an Established Researcher from the National Research Foundation (NRF), South Africa. His research interest is in positive psychology, logotherapy, resilience, forgiveness, and sense of meaning and purpose.

ORCID: <https://orcid.org/0000-0002-9415-5681>

Email: [smakola@cut.ac.za](mailto:smakola@cut.ac.za)

**Professor Gawie Schlebusch** is an Associate Professor in the Department of Post Graduate Studies Education at the Central University of Technology, Free State, South Africa. His research interests include educational management, language in education, educational psychology and teaching and learning.

ORCID: <https://orcid.org/0000-0001-9446-2078>

Email: [gschlebu@cut.ac.za](mailto:gschlebu@cut.ac.za)

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