



Perspectives of the Representative Council of Learners in The Management of Learner Indiscipline in Multiple Deprived Contexts

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ARTICLE INFO ABSTRACT

The role of learners in addressing indiscipline among their peers in school is vital. Learners are well-positioned to contribute meaningfully to this challenge through active involvement in school governance. This study sought to explore the perspectives of the Representative Council of Learners (RCL) in managing learner indiscipline. A qualitative research approach was adopted, and data were collected using semi-structured interview schedules. Participants included two teachers, two members of the School Management Team (SMT) who also serve as parents, and four student leaders. The data were analysed using a thematic analysis approach, with findings organized around emerging themes. These findings revealed that RCL tackles indiscipline in schools by promoting peer-led advocacy for positive behaviour, facilitating communication between learners, teachers, and parents, and helping develop inclusive policies that foster a collaborative environment. In addition, factors that pose challenges for RCL in managing indiscipline behaviours among learners include peer pressure, socio-environmental backgrounds, inconsistent enforcement of school rules, unresolved emotional issues, limited learner involvement in decision-making, and the hardships faced by learners from child-headed households or impoverished communities. In response to these challenges, Education policy should be revised to mandate the inclusion of RCL members in school rule formulation, disciplinary structures, and governance bodies like the Disciplinary Sub-Committee (DSSC). Also, the Department of Basic Education should implement monitoring systems to evaluate the extent to which learners are included in school governance and how RCLs contribute to managing discipline.

Keywords: Educational management, Integrated management approach, Learner indiscipline, multiple deprivations, Secondary schools, Student leadership, South Africa

Introduction

In many schools, the Representative Council of Learners (RCL) is a formal body of elected student leaders tasked with representing the views, interests, and concerns of learners within the school's governance structure (Sousa & Ferreira, 2024). These councils vary by school but generally include roles like president, vice president, secretary, and treasurer. They serve to voice student concerns, plan events, and support school governance in collaboration with staff. RCL plays a vital role in promoting democratic participation and ensuring that learners have a meaningful voice in school decision-making processes (Mathebula, 2024). Due to its significant role in school governance, the RCL is formally established by legislation in South Africa.

The South African Schools Act (SASA) Act No. 84 of 1996, Chapter 2 (11) establishes the legal foundation for RCLs to actively participate in the governance of public schools in South Africa. SASA requires that representatives for learners be democratically elected. Thus, in South African Secondary Schools representative council of learners is the only legally recognized representation of learners with seats on the school governing body (SGB) (SASA, 1996). Since the educational system is becoming more accountable to the public, learners

are expected to play a significant role as a key stakeholder group. Therefore, the RCLs oversee preserving order in schools to reduce learner indiscipline and foster excellent relationships and communication among management, teachers, and learners. Since the democratically elected RCL functions are clearly defined in the SASSA Act 84 of 1996; nevertheless, the multifaceted and dynamic nature of learner indiscipline has made it impossible for them to play an important role in the management of indiscipline in schools. It is, therefore, vital to emphasize that learner indiscipline is multidimensional, and as such, management measures should be dynamic.

Despite the initiatives from the Department of Education and other stakeholders, learner indiscipline plethora continues to rise (Mncube & Harber, 2013). They further argue that this violates the goal of learner engagement in school governance, which is to acquire democratic and leadership abilities. Before 1994, the apartheid government in South Africa barred the majority of the population from participating equally in education, as it did in everything else, and it used education to indoctrinate young people into the status quo of disparities through conformity to authoritarian structures (Harber & Trafford, 1999). Following 1994, the democratic South African government recognized the need to overcome the upheaval of apartheid by involving learners to promote equality in education. Consequently, the government issued a White Paper on School Organization and Funding in 1996, intending to foster democratic institutional management that included all stakeholder groups in active and responsible roles to motivate acceptance, rational debate, and shared decision-making (Department of Education, 1996). So, this White Paper resulted in the South African Schools Act of 1996, which went into effect in 1997. Hence, learner representatives are expected to carry out their tasks as SGB members, one of which is discipline. However, some SGB members are still outraged, believing that learners are immature and thus incapable of making thorough decisions (Mncube, 2001). Contrary, Mncube (2008) suggests that learners' participation in educational discourses would result in improved school running and the promotion of democratic ideals that are emphasized in an integrated management approach. While learners' participation in learner discipline remains a pressing issue, maintaining discipline in deprived contexts is hindered by factors like unmet needs, poverty, and resource shortages (Barnes et al., 2007).

This paper critically explores the experiences of the Representative Council for Learners (RCL) in managing discipline within schools in the King Cetshwayo District in South Africa. It focuses on identifying gaps in discipline enforcement within these schools. The study further seeks to establish and sustain a conducive learning environment in schools. Actionable management strategies will be proposed to address potential challenges that the Representative Council for Learners (RCL) may encounter while promoting and maintaining discipline in schools.

Theoretical framework

In this paper, we examine the role of RCLs in employing an integrated management approach to manage learner indiscipline within contexts of multiple deprivations. The analysis is grounded in the Ladder of citizen participation theoretical construct. The Ladder of citizen participation theory was deemed relevant in this paper because it aimed to understand the levels of participation of the Representative council for learners in the management of learner indiscipline in South African Secondary schools in King Cetshwayo District.

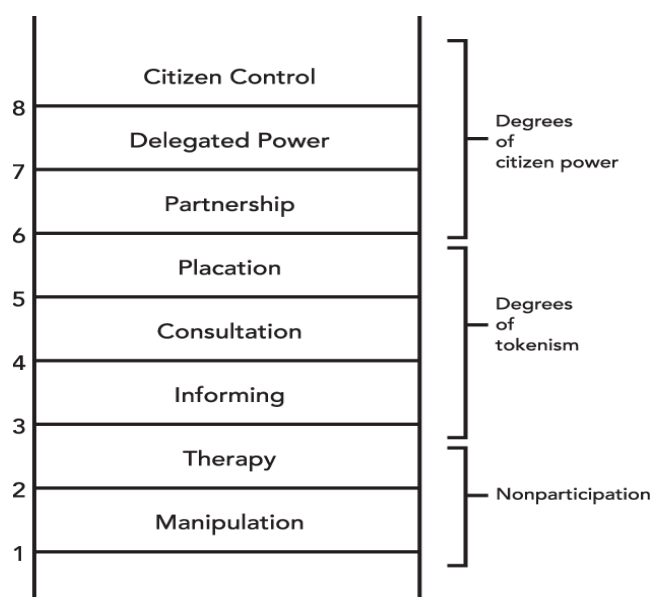


Figure 1: Arnstein's Ladder of Citizen Participation. Source: "A Ladder of Citizen Participation," by S. Arnstein, 1969,

The application of this theory allows for precise descriptions of representative councils for learners' level of engagement in terms of Arnstein's (2004) component of participation. Arnstein (2004) suggests that empowering people allows them to express their opinions to higher authorities, this could be done through ensuring effective involvement in leadership. Therefore, for RCLs to carry out their leadership responsibility of regulating learner indiscipline there is a need for empowerment. Thus, if leaders are to participate effectively, the ladder has three components with eight stages, with the first component of non-participation associated with manipulation and the need for therapy (Arnstein, 2004). The second component in the management of learner indiscipline is tokenism, which includes leaders gaining access to information, conducting consultations, and being placated. As a result, participation in the second component demonstrates an enhanced level of participation in which the representative council for learners has access to some information and is consulted on some significant problems influencing learner indiscipline in schools. The third component is citizen power, which is defined by the full empowerment of stakeholders (RCL) and includes leading through partnerships, exercising full delegated power, and having a great deal of control. However, in the school setting, this can only happen if learners' representatives are empowered, and an integrated management strategy is used. Therefore, utilising the Ladder of citizen participation aided the study in gaining an insight into the degree of empowerment of RCLs, allowing them to carry out their leadership mandate of managing indiscipline in schools.

Guaraldo (1996) shares the same sentiments that leaders require empowerment to influence decisions that affect them in support of the Ladder for Citizen Participation. Furthermore, Hora (2014) asserts that when leaders have power, they can influence decision-making. In this regard, when RCLs are empowered, they can have a significant impact on curbing learner indiscipline in schools. As a result, the Ladder for Citizen Participation aided in the understanding of the effectiveness of RCL leadership by deriving meaning from how secondary schools gave room for learner representatives to bring discipline issues for resolution by the respective councils. Thus, the degree of involvement in decision-making and the availability of effective information flow may influence participation in leadership and governance (André et al., 2012). Therefore, this suggests that RCL should work hard to gain more power and influence in decision-making so that the issues of indiscipline raised by fellow learners are addressed. Hence, the Ladder for Citizen participation was used in this paper to gain a better understanding of the relationship between RCL involvement levels and the success of their leadership mandate through their stories and meanings.

Research Questions

What is the role of the RCL in using an integrated management approach to address indiscipline among learners in the context of multiple deprivations?

What challenges does the Representative Council for Learners encounter when utilising an integrated management approach to manage learner indiscipline within schools located in areas characterized by multiple deprivations?

Literature review

After the advent of democracy in South Africa in 1994, political power shifted from the apartheid regime to a democratic government. This transition led to the creation of a new constitution committed to promoting transparency, accountability, public involvement, and a representative, participatory democracy (Naidoo, 2005). As a result, the South African Schools Act, No. 84 of 1996 (SASA), was introduced to foster a new relationship between schools and the government—one based on collaboration and active citizen participation. This partnership was built upon the involvement of state authorities, school staff, learners, and parents (SASA, 1996). This act further stipulates that all public schools that enroll students in Grade 8 or above must have a Representative Council of Learners (RCL) that the students democratically elect. The RCL then elects two students to represent the entire student body in the School Governing Body (SGB) in South Africa. Through this civic mobilisation the South African Schools Act (SASA) 84 of 1996, aimed to rectify the authoritarian structures of apartheid school governance (RSA, 1996a). Thus, considering the current situation, the Guides for RCLs provide fundamental information on the roles, functions, and responsibilities of RCLs as stakeholders in school governance. Specifically, they aim to establish a clear understanding of the "learner-government" in South African schools, as outlined by Mncube (2012). Furthermore, the Guides for RCLs suggest that the learner government should create a code of conduct for learners and establish a sub-committee that will handle disciplinary matters in public schools. This will help ensure that order and discipline are maintained in South African schools, especially after the end of apartheid.

Therefore, to substantiate the above assertion, learner governments assume the role of disciplinarians, wherein they act as senior students authorized to maintain order and stability within South African schools post-apartheid. In this regard, learner participation and representation enhance diverse perspectives and better decision-making (Nthonto, 2017; RSA, 1996a). Democratic values are fostered through the education

experience (Harber, 2009, cited in Mncube, 2012) and should start at a young age in school governance matters to promote social justice and democracy (Mncube, 2008). Therefore, to ensure discipline in schools SGBs should allow learners to cultivate democratic values for future leadership.

Thus, Mabovula (2009) argues that the outdated concept of being too young influences behaviour during SGB meetings, which can have negative consequences for learners. However, if the members of the SGB and educators treat learners' representatives fairly, they will understand their responsibility to maintain discipline throughout the school. Therefore, when learners participate in the management of learner discipline in the school, they gain a sharper insight, enhance their cognitive abilities (Dube et al 2024), and develop a greater appreciation for their school's values by learning from other SGB members. This highlights the need for SMTs and those they lead, including learners, parents, SGB members, elected officials, businesses, agencies, and all other stakeholders, to be motivated and encouraged to work together to address achievement gaps and deficiencies in maintaining good discipline (Jazzar & Algozzine, 2007). Therefore, by collaborating, these stakeholders can effectively address learner discipline issues. Despite these intentions of ensuring that learners undertake their role of maintaining discipline in schools the *Guides for RCLs* seem to suggest that learners (and their competitive leaders) lack independence, rationality, and objective notions of reason necessary to participate in school governance (Schumpeter, 1950). Hence, Mathebula (2013) suggests that despite the implementation of the Representative Council of Learners (RCL) in many schools and its representation in the School Governing Bodies (SGB), a significant number of SGBs still display a preference for elitist, top-down, and authoritarian governance. According to Carr and Williams (2009), even though the RCL is often present in the SGBs, participation is often only superficial (Mncube, 2008). In contrast, the guidelines emphasize the importance of involving learners in decision-making within their school community. This can be reinforced by adequate consideration of practical matters (Carr & Williams, 2009) including adult-learner ratio and adequate training. Unfortunately, some SGB members are failing to provide this opportunity, resulting in a violation of student rights. Empirical studies reveal that this issue is a global concern impacting learners worldwide.

Groundwater-Smith and Mockler (2016) conducted a study in Australia that focused on the transition from learners' voices to a partnership between learners and teachers. The study suggests that learners are not provided with equal chances to participate in decision-making processes that may impact them. In addition, Fielding (2011) conducted a study in New York that proposes that the use of learners' voices can create opportunities for democratic fellowship in education. Furthermore, the results of a study carried out by Katambalutwa (2014) in Uganda support Fielding's (2011) findings by indicating that every stakeholder holds equal significance in making decisions in schools. Thus, it is crucial to ensure that all parties involved in a school are granted the same chances. This viewpoint is supported by Mabovula (2009), who carried out research in South Africa examining the part played by learners in the administration of high schools. He states that the learners' role was so limited that their voices were unheard. Cockburn (2006) identifies three phases of learner participation: opportunity, attendance, and engagement. However, Mncube (2012) notes that often only the first two phases are present. Therefore, the SGBs must create environments that promote active engagement among learners to ensure discipline in schools and better learning outcomes.

School leaders' reluctance to involve learner leaders in the governance of the school is not the only cause of the challenges encountered by RCLs, the learners themselves may be the cause of indiscipline. Mbatha (2008) asserts that peers often influence learners' behaviour. Njoroge and Nyabuto (2014) have observed that some students behave inappropriately due to peer pressure, which can lead to socially disconnected teams with extreme views. The adherence to a group norm by the peer group can result in blind obedience, exacerbating the problem (Mpuangnan & Roboji, 2024). According to them, bullying and sexual harassment among students can lead to disciplinary issues in schools. Victims of bullying often seek revenge to either stop the bullying or to achieve acknowledgement from their peers, which invariably worsens the problem. Seegopaul (2016) suggests that when learners are influenced by friends who encourage inappropriate behaviour, they may feel empowered to exhibit a lack of self-control. Therefore, it is important to comprehend that the influence of peers can result in disciplinary issues and misconduct both in educational institutions and communities. Delinquency, as per the findings of Temitayo, Nayaya, and Lukman (2013), is a behaviour that is acquired through social and cultural learning when peers interact in small groups. Mbatha (2008) suggests that theft among peers can lead to behavioural deviations in the students who have lost something. Although peer relationships are crucial among learners, they may also have a negative influence on behaviour, which can impact school discipline.

Methodology

In this study, a qualitative research approach was adopted to gather the subjective views of participants. The study population comprised key education stakeholders, including learners, school principals, and parents within the King Cetshwayo District of KwaZulu-Natal Province, South Africa. Specifically, the study focused on members of the Secondary Schools' Representative Council of Learners (RCLs), Senior Management Teams

(SMTs), and School Governing Bodies (SGBs). A total of eight participants were selected, consisting of two SMT members, two parents who are part of the SGB, and four student leaders. All participants were chosen using a purposive sampling technique due to their knowledge and experience in managing learner indiscipline in contexts of multiple deprivation. Data were collected using a semi-structured interview schedule based on the framework by Leedy and Ormrod (2010). The interview guide consisted of predetermined questions, with the flexibility to probe deeper into participants' reasoning and gain further clarification. Permission was obtained from the school administration to arrange interviews at times convenient for participants. Interviews were conducted across three sessions, each lasting approximately 45 minutes. Participants gave consent for their responses to be recorded, and the recordings were later transcribed into a notebook. Thematic analysis was used to interpret the data, following the procedure outlined by de Vos et al. (2011), which involved identifying and categorizing key themes based on their features. To streamline the analysis, each participant was assigned a unique code, ranging from #P1 to #P8. These codes served as identifiers throughout the analysis process, facilitating the clear categorization and presentation of data according to the emerging themes.

Results and discussion

This study examined the perspectives of the Representative Council of Learners (RCL) in managing learner indiscipline. Data were collected to address the two main objectives guiding the study. Under each objective, several sub-themes emerged, which have been presented below.

The role of the RCL in using an integrated management approach to address indiscipline among learners in the context of multiple deprivations

The Representative Council of Learners (RCL) plays a crucial role in managing learner indiscipline, particularly in schools with multiple deprivations. The RCL tackles indiscipline by promoting peer-led advocacy for positive behaviour, facilitating communication between learners, teachers, and parents, and helping develop inclusive policies that foster a collaborative environment for addressing discipline issues within the school.

Peer-Led Discipline Advocacy

The findings from the study highlight that the Representative Council of Learners (RCL) plays a meaningful role in managing learner indiscipline through Peer-Led Discipline Advocacy. The voices of RCL members highlight the value of peer leadership in influencing learner behaviour. For instance, participant #P1 stated, "We can create an environment where discipline is more about mutual respect and support. We often organize peer groups to discuss and address behavioural issues, which has led to fewer conflicts in our school." This aligns with McKinnon (2024), who explains that empowering student leaders to advocate for discipline fosters a school culture built on respect and collective responsibility. Moreover, participant #P4 emphasized the reliability of peer influence by saying, "We understand the challenges our fellow students face, and when we speak up about respecting school rules and good behaviour, it resonates better with them." This reflects the findings of Sew, Bock, and Allen (2024), who argue that student leadership in civics-oriented roles enhances learners' capacity to model and promote positive behaviours among their peers, making disciplinary messages more impactful. Another participant, #P7, highlighted the power of open dialogue by stating, "One of the ways we address indiscipline is by organizing peer-led workshops and sessions where learners talk openly about the consequences of misbehaviour." This finding is supported by Xie (2021), who found that peer-led education provides a more engaging and emotionally safe space for learners to reflect on behaviour and make informed choices. Participant #P3 added, "We help each other understand the importance of good behaviour, which leads to less disruption in class." This echoes the conclusions of Hassell-Goodman et al. (2024), who notes that students guiding other students fosters a culture of shared metacognition and behaviour management, thereby improving the overall classroom environment. Finally, Mallei-luti (2023) supports this approach, emphasizing that student leaders involved in school governance contribute significantly to improving discipline through collaboration and advocacy. These participant perspectives, paired with scholarly evidence, show that Peer-Led Discipline Advocacy enables the RCL to function as a transformative force for reducing learner indiscipline by promoting accountability, empathy, and communication among students.

It is evident that the RCL promotes school discipline through peer-led advocacy by fostering mutual respect among learners. They achieve this by leading discussions and organizing workshops that address behavioural issues, creating a supportive environment where learners take responsibility for their actions and respond positively to guidance from their peers. This approach enhances student engagement, encourages accountability, and creates a more respectful and cooperative school environment.

Facilitating Communication

The findings from the participants indicate that the Representative Council of Learners (RCL) plays a vital role in managing indiscipline by facilitating open and consistent communication between learners and school

authorities. According to participant #P2, "Having a space where we can communicate freely reduces a lot of the tension, and people feel like they're being heard, which leads to fewer discipline problems." This statement highlights how communication can serve as a preventive mechanism by reducing misunderstandings and emotional build-ups that often lead to disruptive behaviour. This aligns with the argument by Manoharan and Ashtikar (2024), who emphasize that effective leadership in education must incorporate open communication to build trust and mutual respect. When learners feel involved in decision-making, they are more likely to cooperate with rules and expectations. Participant #P8 confirmed this by noting, "We have seen how important it is for students to feel heard. When communication is strong, students are more willing to follow rules because they understand the reasoning behind them." This finding underscores the motivational aspect of transparent communication in fostering discipline. Furthermore, #P5 explained, "When students feel like teachers don't understand them, they act out. But when we encourage open conversations between students and teachers, it helps both sides understand each other better, leading to fewer clashes and more cooperation." This sentiment is supported by Faizo (2023), who found that dialogue between students and teachers enhances students' sense of belonging and encourages rule adherence. Similarly, Mphande et al. (2022) observed in their study that school-based conversations significantly contribute to reducing risky behaviour when learners are actively engaged. Participants #P3 and #P6 echoed similar experiences by pointing out that communication platforms, such as regular meetings and check-ins, help address minor concerns before they escalate. #P6 stated, "When we've got regular check-ins between students and teachers, we can address any small issues before they become bigger problems." This view resonates with Briffett-Aktaş and Ying (2025), who stress that student voice even through informal dialogue can serve as a powerful tool in improving school climate and learner behaviour.

The data revealed that the RCL's role in facilitating communication bridges the gap between learners and school staff, fostering mutual understanding and cooperation. By encouraging open dialogue, the RCL creates a supportive environment where learners feel heard, reducing frustration and conflict. This proactive engagement helps address concerns early, preventing minor issues from escalating into disciplinary problems. These practices further suggest that respectful, and inclusive communication is essential for effective school discipline management.

Developing Inclusive Policies

The findings suggest that the Representative Council of Learners (RCL) uses the development of inclusive policies as a key strategy in managing learner indiscipline. When students actively contribute to shaping school policies, they feel a sense of ownership and are more likely to adhere to the rules. As one participant (#P3) stated, "When students help shape the policies, they're more likely to follow them because they feel like they matter. It's not just something that's forced on us, it's something we own." This sense of ownership fosters a more respectful attitude towards the rules and reduces frustration among learners. Moreover, involving students from diverse backgrounds in the policy-making process helps create an environment of inclusivity, as emphasized by Participant #P2: "When students from different backgrounds see that their concerns are considered, they are more willing to engage positively." This aligns with the findings of Schrage and Giacomini (2023), who argue that inclusive policies are essential for creating an environment where all students feel valued, which in turn supports positive behaviour. Furthermore, the approach of developing policies that reflect the experiences and needs of all students helps reduce feelings of being overlooked or unfairly treated, contributing to better discipline. Participant #P8 remarked, "Having policies that reflect everyone's experiences makes a huge difference," underscoring the importance of inclusivity in fostering a sense of fairness and equity. The research also supports the idea that inclusive policies help address the underlying causes of misbehaviour. As participant #P5 pointed out, "It is about understanding why some students act out and helping them through it, which leads to less frustration and more respect." This aligns with Olayinka and Ridwan (2025), who highlight the importance of student leadership in fostering positive school environments and enhancing discipline through collaborative efforts.

The development of inclusive policies empowers learners by actively involving them in shaping the rules and guidelines that govern school conduct. When students see their voices reflected in policy, they feel valued and respected, which increases their willingness to follow the rules. Inclusive policies also ensure that the diverse backgrounds and challenges of all students are considered, reducing feelings of marginalization and promoting cooperation. This collaborative approach fosters a respectful school environment where discipline is maintained through shared ownership and mutual understanding.

The challenges encountered by the Representative Council for Learners when utilising an integrated management approach to manage learner indiscipline

Under this broad theme, five sub-themes generated include peer pressure, environmental background and familiarity in the enforcement of discipline, Learners' bottled-up anger, Inadequate pupils' voice in the implementation of the school rules, and prevalence of child-headed households and poverty.

Peer pressure

The data reveals that peer pressure presents a significant obstacle to discipline in schools, particularly in socio-economically deprived communities. Participants expressed concern that learners, even those from stable family backgrounds, often succumb to peer influence and engage in harmful behaviours to gain acceptance. For example, #P1 noted, “Peer pressure is the most significant difficulty we have with these students,” highlighting how deeply peer dynamics influence conduct within the school environment. This aligns with Kennedy (2024), who found that peer relationships strongly influence school-based aggression and deviant behaviour. Furthermore, #P2 observed that some learners “leave their homes and live in shacks with their friends... including drug misuse and smoking dagga.” This points to the extreme lengths some learners go to conform to group expectations, often resulting in neglect of parental and school authority. Kamara, Koroma, and Kaserero (2023) similarly identified peer influence as a core factor behind increased indiscipline, such as substance abuse and truancy, especially where school structures are weak or unenforced. #P3 added that intoxicated learners not only disrupt class but can also “victimize teachers,” underlining how substance use encouraged by peers—can lead to violence and the breakdown of school order. Fehintola, Sinabio, and Samaila (2025) support this, arguing that the intersection of peer pressure, community conditions, and adolescence can increase a learner’s susceptibility to delinquent behaviour. From a Representative Council of Learners (RCL) perspective, this reality highlights the urgent need to use positive peer influence to counteract negative pressure. Rather than merely reacting to indiscipline, the RCL could take on a proactive role by creating awareness campaigns, modelling constructive behaviour, and leading peer-support groups. By positioning positive peer leaders, the RCL can redirect the powerful influence of peer groups toward promoting discipline and respect for school norms.

The findings suggest that peer pressure plays a dual role in learner discipline. On one hand, it contributes to disobedience, substance abuse, and resistance to authority, especially in contexts of deprivation. On the other hand, if positively channelled, peer pressure offers an opportunity for the Representative Council of Learners (RCL) to lead by example. RCL can help shift peer influence toward fostering unity, accountability, and discipline. This requires strategic planning and strong institutional backing to ensure that peer leadership becomes a transformative force within the school environment.

Environmental background and familiarity with the enforcement of discipline

The data highlights that environmental background significantly shapes learner behaviour. This makes the role of the Representative Council for Learners (RCL) in managing indiscipline both complex and crucial. Participants emphasized that students come from diverse home settings where discipline norms vary, leading to different interpretations of school rules. For example, #P6 noted, “We all have different ideas about discipline... it may not feel right to some people because they were not taught what discipline is at home.” This aligns with Obidinnu (2024), who found that school indiscipline is often rooted in inconsistent home environments. Similarly, Rizzotto and França (2022) argue that school climate, influenced by learners’ backgrounds, impacts both discipline and performance. RCLs face the challenge of bridging this home-school gap. As #P1 explained, “They do not grasp the school’s formality or context,” showing the difficulty in instilling consistent discipline among learners unfamiliar with formal codes of conduct. Andrea (2023) supports this by highlighting the struggle teachers face in controlling student behaviour amid environmental change. However, this challenge is also an opportunity. Through peer modelling and contextual awareness, RCLs can help learners internalize school values in ways that resonate with their lived realities. In line with Nelsen’s (2012) Positive Discipline Theory, RCLs can foster respect and responsibility by promoting empathetic, culturally sensitive dialogue around discipline. RCLs become critical agents of change translating rules into shared values across diverse learner backgrounds by acknowledging the environmental disparities that shape behaviour and reinforcing school norms through inclusive engagement.

It is evident that environmental background significantly influences learner behaviour, making the role of RCL in managing indiscipline both challenging and important. Learners come from varied home environments where understandings of discipline differ, often leading to misinterpretations of school rules. However, when RCLs promote dialogue, model positive behaviour, and contextualize the school’s Code of Conduct, they help bridge the gap between home and school expectations. This approach reflects the principles of positive discipline theory, which advocates mutual respect and democratic guidance. Therefore, RCLs play a crucial role in fostering discipline through empathy and peer-led support.

Learners’ bottled-up anger

The data reveals that learners’ bottled-up anger, often rooted in family challenges such as parental loss, separation, or illness, contributes significantly to indiscipline in schools. This unresolved emotional distress leads learners to become aggressive, defiant, and disengaged. For the Representative Council for Learners (RCL), this presents a sensitive but vital challenge: managing peers who are not simply misbehaving but are

emotionally wounded. Participants' narratives clearly show that many learners suffer in silence. As #P7 and #P8 explained, family disruption or lack of parental presence breeds internal conflict, which is then misdirected at authority figures or fellow learners. This is supported by Jacob and Aloka, who emphasize that domestic instability can trigger behavioural problems in school. Oben and Hui (2025) also suggest that punitive responses to such emotional issues may do more harm than good, often escalating rather than resolving indiscipline. In these contexts, the RCL's role extends beyond enforcement. As peer leaders, RCL members must become empathetic listeners and advocates for emotional well-being. This aligns with Khanyile and Mpuangnan's (2024) call for integrated approaches to discipline that combine emotional support and participatory leadership. RCLs can help de-escalate tension by providing safe spaces for learners to share their frustrations and guiding them toward appropriate support structures. Moreover, Kariithi (2024) argues that disciplinary strategies are more effective when they consider the learner's background and emotional state. If properly trained and supported, RCLs can serve as intermediaries between troubled learners and school management, helping translate emotional struggles into constructive dialogue instead of misbehaviour.

It was established that bottled-up anger among learners poses a significant challenge to the RCL's role in maintaining discipline. However, this challenge also presents an opportunity for the RCL to act as a healing and transformative force within the school. When peer leaders are equipped with emotional intelligence, they can identify underlying emotional struggles and respond with empathy. This enables them to shift from a punitive approach to one focused on restorative practices. By offering support and understanding, RCL members can foster a positive school climate, reduce conflict, and promote emotional well-being alongside improved learner discipline.

Inadequate learners' voice in the implementation of the school rules

The data reveals that inadequate learner voice in the implementation of school rules undermines the effectiveness of the Representative Council for Learners (RCL) in promoting discipline. Despite South Africa's Schools Act (1996) and global frameworks like the UNCROC (1989), which affirm learners' rights to participate in decisions affecting them, RCLs often lack meaningful involvement in drafting or amending school rules. Participants highlighted that learners are expected to enforce policies they did not help shape, which diminishes their sense of ownership and accountability. This aligns with Rinnooy Kan et al. (2024), who argue that democratic school culture and voice-inclusive practices nurture responsibility and respect for rules. Similarly, Jones and Bubb (2021) contend that student voice initiatives improve discipline and school improvement when learners are active collaborators. Conversely, the exclusion of learners from sensitive decision-making spaces like the DSSC, though understandable from a safety standpoint (as echoed by #P1), reflects a lack of trust and empowerment. Gillett-Swan et al. (2025) emphasize that protective structures should be in place to ensure learners' safe participation without compromising their dignity or risking retribution. The current practice resembles Glanz's (2006) notion of "contrived collegiality," where collaboration is superficial and learners' roles are symbolic rather than functional. This denies RCLs the chance to embody the positive discipline approach advocated by Lane et al. (2013), which stresses learner involvement in decision-making. Thus, strengthening participatory structures, safeguarding learner representatives, and integrating their contributions meaningfully into policy development are essential for RCLs to manage discipline effectively and democratically.

The data shows that inadequate learner voice in rulemaking weakens the Representative Council for Learners' (RCL) role in managing discipline. Although policies support student participation, RCLs are often excluded from drafting school rules, leaving them to enforce policies they did not help create. This limits learners' sense of ownership and undermines compliance. Exclusion from key committees due to safety concerns, as noted by participants, reflects a lack of empowerment. Enhancing student voice is crucial for democratic, effective discipline practices.

Prevalence of child-headed households and poverty

A child-headed household refers to a household where there are no adult carers available. Thus, a teenager under the age of 18 will take care of siblings. Poverty refers to a condition where the community or an individual lacks the financial means to provide for basic needs. The prevalence of child-headed households and poverty creates significant challenges for the Representative Council for Learners (RCL) in managing indiscipline in schools. Participants highlighted that many learners are orphans and "discipline themselves; no one is accountable for disciplining them." These learners often do not perceive teachers as authority figures, as they have assumed parental roles themselves. As #P4 stated, "It is extremely difficult to punish someone who is a parent or mother at home because such a child does not regard himself or herself as a child." The lack of parental guidance at home means these learners are unfamiliar with receiving instructions, making it difficult for schools to enforce discipline effectively. Furthermore, the demands placed on these learners due to their responsibilities at home significantly impact their ability to focus on school. As #P1 explained, "The challenges

of leading the family, returning from school and cooking, and caring for the young ones at home... do not leave the parental learner with enough time to do his/her schoolwork." In some cases, learners are forced to miss school in order to secure food for their families. #P2 added, "Learners sometimes do not attend school because they need to go out and hustle for something to eat." This economic burden causes emotional strain, absenteeism, and academic underperformance, all of which contribute to behavioural issues. Studies by MS (2024), Chidhumo et al. (2024), and Makuya (2022) confirm that poverty and child-headed household structures undermine learner discipline and educational outcomes.

Given these realities, the RCL's role should be reconceptualized not just as disciplinarians, but as peer advocates who understand the lived experiences of vulnerable learners. While they may not be able to resolve socio-economic issues, they can help mediate understanding between learners and teachers. However, this would require equipping RCL members with training in empathy, counselling, and leadership. Without such support, as the participants noted, RCLs are limited in their influence. As #P3 remarked, "These students do not listen to their teachers," highlighting the need for a more compassionate and supportive approach rather than one solely based on enforcement.

Recommendations

Based on the findings of this study, it can be recommended that education policy should be revised to mandate the inclusion of RCL members in school rule formulation, disciplinary structures, and governance bodies like the Disciplinary Sub-Committee (DSSC). This aligns with the South African Schools Act and international frameworks like the UNCRC, ensuring learners' voices are institutionalized rather than symbolic.

School management teams should implement structured training programmes to equip RCLs with emotional intelligence, conflict resolution skills, and leadership capabilities. This will enable them to shift from punitive responses to restorative practices when managing indiscipline.

School management and district offices should implement targeted support systems such as counselling, nutrition programmes, and mentorship for learners from child-headed households and impoverished backgrounds. This ensures that the burden of emotional and social support does not fall solely on RCL members, allowing them to focus on their representative and leadership roles.

The Department of Basic Education should implement monitoring systems to evaluate the extent to which learners are included in school governance and how RCLs contribute to managing discipline. Regular reports generated from these assessments should guide policy adjustments and strengthen learner participation practices across schools.

Further empirical studies should explore the long-term impact of RCL involvement in discipline management across different socio-economic contexts. Research should also examine how gender, safety, and power dynamics affect RCL participation in sensitive decision-making processes.

Conclusion

This study explored the perspectives of the Representative Council of Learners (RCL) in managing learner indiscipline in multiple deprived contexts. It focused on selected high schools in South Africa highlighting the multifaceted role of RCL in promoting a positive school environment. RCL members often serve as peer advocates, using their influence to encourage good behaviour among learners. They also act as intermediaries between learners, teachers, and parents, helping to improve communication and resolve misunderstandings. Additionally, the RCL contributes to shaping inclusive school policies by voicing learner concerns and promoting a sense of shared responsibility, which fosters collaboration and reduces conflict. However, the RCL's efforts are often hindered by several complex challenges. Peer pressure and adverse socio-environmental conditions can undermine their authority, while inconsistent enforcement of school rules reduces the credibility of disciplinary measures. Emotional trauma, especially among learners from child-headed households or impoverished backgrounds, adds another layer of difficulty. Furthermore, when learners are excluded from key decision-making processes, they may feel alienated and resist rules that they had no hand in shaping. These limitations point to the need for stronger support systems, greater inclusion of learner voices in governance, and a more holistic approach to school discipline.

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