

Taming the Storm: Unpacking Discipline Challenges and Management Strategies in Special Schools

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ABSTRACT:

Special schools cater to learners with diverse special needs, whose unique challenges often test teachers' capacity to manage discipline effectively. This study examined how teachers address indiscipline and the challenges they face in special schools within South Africa's Free State Province, specifically in the Mangaung Metro District. Guided by the Discipline with Dignity Theory (DDT) and framed within an interpretivist, qualitative paradigm, a phenomenological design was employed. Data were collected through semi-structured interviews with six purposively selected teachers and were analysed thematically.

Findings reveal that teachers adopt dignity-preserving strategies, such as privilege systems that reinforce positive behaviour through recognition (preventive), one-on-one conversations that build empathy and trust (relational), learner codes of conduct that promote fairness and accountability (structural), and therapeutic activities that restore a sense of belonging and self-worth (restorative). However, systemic barriers, including communication difficulties, limited professional training, low parental involvement, and socio-economic hardship, undermine consistent application of these approaches.

The study recommends that the Department of Basic Education provide ongoing, context-specific training on restorative disciplinary practices tailored to learners with special needs and reduce academic pressures on teachers to enable a focus on behavioural development. Strengthening parental engagement and improving communication tools for deaf learners are also crucial. The study offers novel insights into the practical implementation and limitations of dignity-based discipline in special schools, thereby enriching the discourse on inclusive education.

Keywords: Classroom Management, Special School Education, Discipline with Dignity, Inclusive Education, Indiscipline

INTRODUCTION

Sustainable Development Goal 4 (SDG 4) of the United Nations urges all member states to ensure inclusive and equitable quality education for all learners, including those with special needs (Tanveer & Babu, 2024). As a signatory, South Africa is obligated to align its educational policies with this mandate. In response, the Department of Basic Education (DBE) implemented the Screening, Identification, Assessment and Support (SIAS) Policy to provide a structured framework for placing learners in special school settings (DBE, 2014).

Several measures are taken to evaluate the progress in this regard. In its 2023 progress report to the Parliamentary Monitoring Group, the DBE documented significant advancements in implementing inclusive education. Between 2002 and 2022, the number of special schools increased from 295 to 489, while the number of full-service schools expanded from 30 to 832. Simultaneously, the enrolment of learners with disabilities in ordinary public schools increased from 77,000 to 121,461, and the number of learners in special schools rose from 435 to 137,483 nationwide. Furthermore, since 2018, the Learners with Severe to Profound Intellectual Disabilities Grant has supported over 8,600 children across special care centres and designated schools (PMG, 2023).

Despite notable progress, significant challenges persist in advancing inclusive education in South Africa. In April 2025, the Minister of Basic Education, Siviwe Gwarube, acknowledged that the number of special schools remains insufficient to meet the growing demand (Chimombe, 2025). Media reports further revealed tensions between the Free State Department of Education and the Free State Deaf Association, which alleged that some educators in the province's special schools are underqualified, particularly in South African Sign Language (South African Broadcasting Corporation [SABC], 2025). The Director of the Special Needs Programme confirmed these concerns, indicating that national and provincial investigations had verified a shortage of qualified sign-language teachers (SABC, 2025).

In their study, which explored the effects of sign language barriers among Deaf learners in special schools for the Deaf and Blind in the Motheo District, Ngobeni et al. (2020) found that this language barrier, combined with the absence of in-service SASL training, severely constrains learning. According to Akach et al. (2009), nearly 90% of teachers in South Africa teach Deaf learners without any knowledge of SASL. These findings align with Walton and Engelbrecht's (2024) argument that in-

clusive education policies will remain ineffective unless teacher capacity and ongoing professional development are strengthened to address the diverse needs of learners in both special and mainstream contexts. Consequently, the minister's acknowledgement, the director's confirmation, and the findings of Ngobeni et al. (2020) underscore the need for a more thorough investigation into the quality of education provided by existing special schools.

High-quality teaching is crucial for enabling learners with disabilities to reach their full potential (Stephenson et al., 2025), and a key component of such teaching is the educator's ability to manage classroom behaviour effectively (Qangule & Letuma, 2025). This concern becomes even more pressing given that some teachers in special schools have been found to lack adequate qualifications, particularly in sign language, raising critical questions about their preparedness to handle the behavioural and emotional challenges common in these learning environments.

Learners in special schools often present with a complex interplay of behavioural and emotional challenges that significantly disrupt classroom routines and jeopardise the safety of both educators and peers (Cheng & Toran, 2022; Idris & Badzis, 2017; Shoko, 2024; Van der Linde, 2019). Studies by Molteno et al. (2001) in Cape Town and Van der Linde (2019) in Gauteng confirm the enduring prevalence of disruptive and antisocial behaviours in these settings. Van der Linde (2019) found that teachers and support staff in special schools frequently face serious behavioural challenges. These include extreme aggression, temper tantrums, verbal abuse directed at teachers and other learners, threats or physical attacks on teachers, and the throwing of books or pencil cases at them. Additional issues reported include learners bringing weapons or knives to school, displaying severe defiance, biting and scratching teachers, engaging in intense bullying of peers, as well as persistent screaming and shouting. These behaviours are frequently exacerbated by co-existing conditions such as ADHD, characterised by inattention, hyperactivity, and impulsivity (American Psychiatric Association, 2000). Moreover, many learners with cognitive impairments struggle with social information processing, which increases their likelihood of displaying oppositional or aggressive behaviours (Beld et al., 2021; Rose et al., 2010).

Collectively, these behavioural patterns pose serious challenges to effective teaching and learning. They raise concerns about how teachers manage to sustain a conducive learning environment in the face of such adversity. Despite the increasing visibility of these issues, a notable gap remains in the literature regarding the specific

strategies educators use to address indiscipline in special schools, especially in the Free State Province. This gap has motivated the present study, particularly given the importance of classroom management in ensuring inclusive, high-quality education. The following research questions guide the study:

- What strategies do teachers employ to ensure discipline in special schools?
- What challenges do teachers face when addressing indiscipline in special schools?

LITERATURE REVIEW

The literature review is thematically structured to provide a logical understanding of learner indiscipline in special schools. It begins by examining the causes of indiscipline, establishing the social, psychological, and environmental foundations of misbehaviour. This is followed by a discussion of theoretical approaches to indiscipline, which offer conceptual frameworks for interpreting and managing behaviour in diverse educational contexts. The next section explores the challenges faced by teachers in special schools, connecting theoretical insights with the realities of practice. Together, these sections illuminate the need for context-sensitive strategies that preserve learner dignity and inform the choice of the Discipline with Dignity Theory as the guiding framework for this study.

Causes of Indiscipline in Schools

Indiscipline in schools often stems from a complex interplay of individual, social, and environmental factors. Most secondary-school learners are in adolescence, a developmental stage characterised by heightened curiosity and a strong desire for exploration (Cherewick et al., 2021). While these traits are essential for cognitive and personal growth, they can also lead to risky and disruptive behaviours if not properly guided (Rachel et al., 2022). One of the most critical influences during this period is the home environment. Families shape behavioural patterns through both positive and negative reinforcement, and inadequate parental supervision during adolescence has been strongly linked to behavioural issues in schools (Patnaik & Subban, 2023; Quill & Kahu, 2022; Rachel et al., 2022).

Social influences further contribute to learner misconduct. Peer pressure is particularly potent during adolescence, as students are highly vulnerable to adopting the behaviours and attitudes of their social groups (Letuma & Mdogana-Zide, 2024; Potokri & Lumadi, 2025). In addition, exposure to antisocial behaviour, especially violence

portrayed in the media, has been shown to increase the likelihood of defiance and misconduct in school settings (Potokri & Lumadi, 2025). Substance use, including the consumption of alcohol and tobacco, also poses a growing challenge, often intensifying existing behavioural problems among learners (Mamabolo, 2020).

While these factors are predominantly noted in mainstream schools, they hold equal significance in special-school settings. Adolescents in special-education environments experience comparable developmental and social dynamics, including peer influence and media exposure. This suggests that the fundamental causes of indiscipline intersect across contexts. Nonetheless, researchers such as Shoko (2024) highlight that in special schools, certain disruptive behaviours may be linked to specific disabilities, adding a layer of complexity to discipline management. Transitioning from causes to conceptual understanding, the following section examines theoretical approaches that offer guidance on managing such multifaceted behavioural challenges.

Theoretical Approaches to Indiscipline

Various theoretical approaches can be used to guide classroom management and address indiscipline in special schools. Theories such as the Behaviourist, Humanistic, and Choice perspectives provide foundations for creating positive learning environments (Santrock, 2011). Demirezen (1988) describes the behaviourist approach as focusing on the interaction between stimuli and responses, making it suitable for managing observable behaviours among learners with special needs. Similarly, Woolfolk-Hoy (2020) explains that Humanistic Theory emphasises respect, empathy, and understanding, motivating learners through care and safety. Skeen (2002) adds that Choice Theory promotes internal motivation by fulfilling core psychological needs of belonging and freedom, which are essential in fostering positive school environments.

Assertive Discipline Theory, proposed by Canter (2004), emphasises clear expectations, consistent consequences, and assertive communication to maintain order among students with special needs. Swinson and Cording (2002) support this by suggesting that assertive approaches empower teachers to respond effectively to misbehaviour. Bandura's (2018) Social Learning Theory extends this by highlighting observation, imitation, and modelling as tools for promoting desirable behaviour. Furthermore, Bronfenbrenner's (1979) Ecological Systems Theory broadens the understanding of discipline by situating the learner within interconnected family,

school, and community systems. Finally, Moran et al. (2024) describe Restorative Practices Theory as a relational approach that fosters empathy and accountability by repairing harm rather than relying on punishment.

Collectively, these frameworks demonstrate that no single model can fully address the diversity of behavioural needs in special schools. Instead, they underscore the importance of integrating multiple theoretical insights into context-specific strategies. Building on these conceptual foundations, the following section examines how teachers experience and manage disciplinary challenges in special education contexts.

Challenges Faced by Teachers in Special Schools

Beyond the social and environmental factors common to all schools, learners in special-school contexts often experience disability-related challenges that manifest as indiscipline. Shoko (2024) emphasises that such behaviours are frequently linked to the nature of learners' impairments and the school's capacity to accommodate them. Communication barriers, particularly among Deaf learners, are a recurrent source of frustration, withdrawal, or defiance when teachers lack sufficient proficiency in South African Sign Language (Adeniyi et al., 2021; Shoko, 2024). Similarly, learners with visual impairments may exhibit oppositional or aggressive behaviour stemming from dependency, social isolation, or inadequate supervision (Ghorbaninejad et al., 2020). Those diagnosed with attention-deficit or neurodevelopmental disorders tend to display impulsivity, restlessness, and hyperactivity that disrupt classroom routines (Bolinger et al., 2020), while learners on the autism spectrum often demonstrate rigid or repetitive behaviours and limited social awareness, which teachers may misinterpret as defiance (Pienaar & Dreyer, 2024). Collectively, these patterns illustrate that what appears as misbehaviour in special schools often reflects unmet communication and support needs rather than deliberate noncompliance.

Teachers working in these contexts face complex challenges in maintaining positive learning environments. Studies have consistently highlighted issues such as inadequate training, insufficient administrative support, and limited resources as key barriers to effective classroom management (Pienaar & Dreyer, 2024; Shoko, 2024). Shoko (2024) observed that Deaf learners' behavioural difficulties frequently test teachers' management skills, while Pienaar and Dreyer (2024) found that limited teacher expertise in inclusive strategies hampers the integration of learners with diverse needs. Additionally,

dysfunctional school disciplinary committees exacerbate behavioural problems, as Letuma (2024) reported that weak institutional structures hinder the consistent enforcement of behavioural norms.

Beyond school-level factors, broader ecological influences also shape learner behaviour. Berkowitz et al. (2021) demonstrated that socio-economic status and parental involvement strongly affect behavioural outcomes, while Almalki et al. (2021) found that parental disengagement often results from systemic and social barriers. Within the South African context, Luxomo and Motala (2012) observed that poverty and reliance on social grants diminish parental participation, weakening school discipline. Altogether, these challenges indicate that managing learner behaviour in special schools requires approaches that extend beyond punitive measures. Emphasising dignity, empathy, and restorative engagement, as advocated by the Discipline with Dignity Theory, provides a framework for addressing these behavioural challenges while preserving learners' self-worth and promoting inclusion.

Theoretical Framework: Discipline with Dignity Theory

This study is anchored in the Discipline with Dignity Theory (DDT) developed by Richard Curwin and Mendler (1988). DDT emerged as a response to authoritarian and punitive models of classroom management that emphasised control and compliance over respect and understanding. The theory's central premise is that effective discipline must preserve and enhance learners' dignity, even when they misbehave. Curwin et al. (2018) argue that punitive approaches may produce short-term obedience but often damage the teacher-learner relationship, leading to resentment and repeated misconduct. In contrast, dignity-based discipline fosters responsibility, self-reflection, and mutual respect — qualities essential for sustainable behaviour change (Curwin & Mendler, 1988; Espela et al., 2021).

The theory is built on three interrelated pillars known as the three D's: Dignity, Discipline, and Democracy. Dignity entails treating learners respectfully, focusing on understanding rather than humiliation. Discipline involves guiding learners toward self-control and accountability rather than imposing punishment. Democracy encourages shared ownership of classroom norms, where learners participate in developing rules and consequences. Together, these elements promote an environment of fairness, empathy, and cooperation. Misbehaviour is reframed as a learning opportunity, a moment for dialogue, reflection, and restoration rather than exclusion or penalty (Curwin et al., 2018).

In practice, DDT is operationalised through strategies such as collaborative rule-setting, reflective dialogue, restorative conversations, consistent yet fair consequences, and learner participation in problem-solving. Teachers model calm, empathy, and fairness while encouraging learners to evaluate the impact of their behaviour. In this study, DDT serves as the analytical lens for interpreting how teachers manage discipline in special schools. It provides a framework for examining both the strategies teachers employ to maintain discipline and the challenges they encounter when addressing indiscipline among learners with diverse educational and behavioural needs. By situating these experiences within the principles of dignity, discipline, and democracy, the theory helps explain how teachers balance authority, care, and inclusivity in complex special-school environments.

MATERIAL AND METHODS

Paradigm and Approach

This study adopted an interpretive paradigm, which aligns with understanding participants’ subjective experiences and the multiple factors influencing their behaviour. As noted by Pervin and Mokhtar (2022), the interpretive paradigm enables researchers to consider the complex interplay of contextual elements that shape individuals’ behavioural traits. This paradigm is particularly appropriate for the current study, as it facilitates the exploration of teachers’ in-depth life experiences in managing indiscipline in special secondary schools.

Additionally, a qualitative research approach was employed. Patel (2015) explains that qualitative methods enable individuals to interpret their external experiences and internal perceptions, providing rich and detailed insights into human behaviour. As Creswell (2020) asserts, qualitative research is instrumental in analysing behavioural

phenomena across disciplines such as education, health sciences, politics, and sociology. In this study, the qualitative approach proves advantageous by enabling the collection of nuanced perspectives, practical insights, and lived experiences from participants who manage behavioural challenges in special education settings.

Design

This study employed a phenomenological research design. According to Merriam and Grenier (2019), phenomenology focuses on uncovering the meaning individuals assign to their lived experiences. This approach is particularly well-suited to the current study, as it enables an in-depth exploration of the experiences of those working with learners with special needs. Phenomenology aims to comprehend how individuals perceive, interpret, and make sense of their everyday realities, encompassing their actions, thoughts, and impressions within a specific context (Merriam & Grenier, 2019).

Data generation

Data were generated through semi-structured interviews, which are particularly suited to phenomenological studies because they allow participants to share their lived experiences in depth while enabling the researcher to probe emerging meanings. This method provided the flexibility to follow teachers’ narratives as they reflected on their everyday experiences of maintaining discipline in special schools.

To ensure focus and consistency, a topic guide was developed from the two central research questions: (1) What strategies do teachers employ to ensure discipline in special schools? and (2) What challenges do teachers face when addressing indiscipline in special schools? The guide consisted of open-ended questions grouped under two broad areas (Table 1).

Table 1. Details of the research focus question and interview questions

Research Focus Area	Sample Interview Questions
(a) Strategies for Maintaining Discipline	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Can you describe how you maintain discipline in your classroom? • How do learners’ specific impairments influence how you manage their behaviour? • Does your school use a formal system to promote positive behaviour? • How do you talk to or counsel learners when they misbehave? • Do you employ any activities to help learners regulate their emotions or behaviour?
(b) Challenges in Managing Indiscipline	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • What challenges do you encounter when addressing indiscipline in your class or school? • How adequate are the guidelines or training you have received on handling learner discipline? • How do departmental expectations or workload affect your ability to manage behaviour? • Can you describe how factors beyond the classroom setting shape your experiences in managing learner behaviour?

Table 2. Details of the sampled secondary schools

Name of school	Number of principals	Number of deputy principals	Number of departmental heads	Number of teachers	Number of learners
School A	1	1	3	23	79
School B	1	2	8	36	336

Follow-up probes such as “Can you tell me more about that?” or “How did that situation make you feel as a teacher?” were used to deepen understanding of participants’ experiences.

To contextualise the study sample, Table 2 summarises the participating schools and the number of individuals drawn from each, further detailing the number of principals, departmental heads, teachers, and learners per school (Table 2).

To provide further details about the participants, Table 3 presents their biographic information, including assigned pseudonyms for both participants and schools, as well as their positions, gender, years of experience, and highest qualifications.

Data Analysis

The data in this study were analysed using Braun and Clarke’s (2006) six-phase thematic analysis approach. The researcher followed an inductive approach to analysis. The researcher began by familiarising themselves with the interview transcripts, then generated initial codes linked to strategies for promoting discipline and challenges in managing indiscipline. Related codes were grouped into preliminary themes, which were reviewed and refined to ensure clarity and relevance. Final themes drawn from the data reflect the data’s meaning. These themes directly addressed the study’s

core questions on the strategies teachers employ and the challenges they face in managing learner behaviour in special schools.

Trustworthiness

To ensure the trustworthiness of the study, multiple strategies were employed to enhance credibility, confirmability, and transparency. Member checking was conducted after data transcription and the initial development of themes. Each participant received a copy of their transcribed interview and the corresponding thematic summary to verify the accuracy of their contributions and to confirm that the interpretations reflected their intended meanings. Participants were encouraged to provide corrections or clarifications, which were incorporated into the final dataset to maintain authenticity.

To further enhance credibility, the presentation of findings includes direct verbatim quotations from participants, allowing their voices to remain central to the interpretation. Additionally, the study provides detailed biographical information of participants and demographic descriptions of the research sites to contextualise the findings and strengthen their transferability. These combined measures ensured that the results authentically represent the participants’ lived experiences and that the interpretations remain grounded in their perspectives.

Table 3: Participants’ biographic details

Pseudonyms	School	position	Gender	Teaching experience	Highest qualification
M1	A	teacher	F	35	B.Ed.
M2	A	teacher	F	31	B.Ed. Honours
M3	A	teacher	F	13	B.Ed.
M4	B	DH	M	22	B.Ed. Honours
M5	B	DH	M	13	B.Ed. Honours
M6	B	teacher	F	19	ACE

Keys: B.Ed.-Bachelor of Education, ACE-Advanced Certificate in Education, PGCE-Postgraduate Certificate in Education, BSc-Bachelor of Science

FINDINGS

This section presents the findings in relation to the two research questions that guided the study: (1) What strategies do teachers employ to ensure discipline in special schools? and (2) What challenges do teachers face when addressing indiscipline in special schools? The analysis yielded two overarching themes corresponding to these questions. The first theme, "Strategies that teachers employ to address indiscipline," encompasses four sub-themes: (a) privilege system, (b) code of conduct, (c) one-on-one conversations, and (d) therapeutic activities. The second theme, "Challenges experienced by teachers in addressing indiscipline," also consists of four sub-themes: (a) communication barriers, (b) limited guidelines and training, (c) pressure on teachers, and (d) poverty and limited parental involvement. Together, these themes provide a comprehensive understanding of how teachers in special schools navigate the dual task of promoting discipline and responding to behavioural challenges.

Strategies that the teachers employ to address indiscipline in special schools

Under this theme, four sub-themes emerged from the data. The participants indicated they manage indiscipline by employing a privilege system, code of conduct, talking with learners one-on-one, and applying therapeutic activities.

Privilege system

The participants revealed that they employ a privilege system grounded in the Circle of Courage developmental framework to encourage positive behaviour and self-discipline among learners. This system is designed to reward desirable conduct and discourage inappropriate behaviour through a structured process of evaluation and reinforcement. Teachers explained that learners are continuously assessed and awarded points for good behaviour, effort, and respect, while privileges are reduced when conduct deviates from expected norms.

M3 (School A) explained:

We have a privilege system where we evaluate learners and give them marks for good behaviour. So, if you are out of line, you will not get those good marks, and there is a reward for good behaviour.

M1 (School A) explained:

We follow the developmental program of the circle of courage, which includes pre-wronging, self-discipline, and everything else. We received individual marks assessment and gave ten points on the circle of courage we used.
Code of Conduct

The participants also stated that the code of conduct is utilised in special educational schools to address learner indiscipline.

M4 (School B) shared:

Yeah, generally, there is a code of conduct for the learners. It works for them, but it depends on the school whether it implements it. In my case, I am just implementing it.

One on one conversation

The data also revealed that teachers engage in individual conversations with learners to address indiscipline; if necessary, they refer them to psychologists, psychiatrists, or youth care services.

M3 (School A) shared:

When I have exhausted all means, I either talk to the child or report the issue for assistance. Okay, that will either be done by the deputy head or, in some cases, if you think it is more psychological, the youth care workers. Then, it will come here to the psychologist, the psychiatrist, etc.

M4 (School B) highlighted:

I am using my approach, like the one I use at home for my kids. I try to share my beliefs so they can understand through talking to them.

Therapeutic activities

On the other hand, M1 (School A) stated that she prefers therapeutic activities to address their indiscipline. This is what she shared.

I make them do something more therapeutic than educational. Anything that is, to that degree, learning is educational. I also use that as therapeutic to make them feel like they belong, express themselves, challenge their skills, learn new skills, and work on their self-image and how they present themselves.

Challenges experienced by the teachers when addressing indiscipline

Under this theme, four sub-themes emerged. The study revealed that teachers encounter problems such as communication barriers, limited guidelines and training, pressure on teachers, poverty and limited parental involvement.

Communication barriers

The participant indicated that communicating with deaf learners is a challenge, which also leads to learners misbehaving.

M4(School B) stated:

The real challenge is communication. Sometimes, you follow the story. When you get that side, you realise that

ayikhona (there is nothing like this). I did not understand the story well so that you would be disciplining something. You start to see from the child's reaction that you are lost for not responding well. Another challenge is that deaf learners tend to hide issues. Drawing them from their hearts is such a process.

Limited Guidelines and Training

The participant further shared that they experience challenges of not having clear guidelines to follow.

M5 (School B) stated that:

As I said, there is no clear guideline for when to do this when the learner speaks back to you or does not want to comply or do their work immediately. A further obstacle experienced by teachers when managing indiscipline in special schools is a lack of professional development.

M3 (School A) lamented:

It does not happen often, but we have had disciplinary training. I was trained about 18 years ago or something. However, we also sometimes find that what works, what they sometimes talk about in terms of discipline there, does not fit our situation.

Pressure on teachers

The participants also highlighted that the department puts too much pressure on teachers, which leads to teachers putting too much pressure on learners to the extent that they do not get enough time to discipline them accordingly.

M3 (School A) indicated:

So, from the department side, we are pressured to have these kids perform. However, now you have a kid who has not been in school, you have a kid who has emotional problems, and they cannot concentrate on developmental problems because of neglect. Moreover, they want that person to perform at the same level as another child. Moreover, they do not realise that there is another part that is not functioning that must first be fixed, if possible, before that part can be addressed.

Poverty and Limited parental involvement

The findings revealed that the participants encountered various obstacles, including poverty and parental involvement.

M4 (School B) shared:

Unfortunately, the parents are not involved now. Some feel that the school is a dumping site. They do not even provide basic things for their kids. So that is the most unfortunate part: the sad experience of deaf learners.

Regarding poverty, M4 (School B) indicated:

Unfortunately, most of the parents are very poor and then, you know, poverty. So those poor parents are far

more uninvolved, even in the hearing. So, what is even exacerbating the situation is that the parents do not see the need for their kids to be educated somehow.

DISCUSSIONS

Privilege system

The findings indicate that the privilege system is used to encourage positive behaviour in special schools by reinforcing responsibility and self-discipline. Similar to the observations of Andrea and Leandry (2021), this approach rewards learners who display appropriate conduct with tangible privileges, such as extra breaks, leadership roles, or participation in preferred activities (Curwin et al., 2018). However, beyond its behavioural function, the privilege system also aligns with the principles of Dignity Discipline Theory (DDT), which emphasises respect, belonging, and the preservation of learner self-worth during disciplinary processes.

By linking behaviour management to the Circle of Courage framework, teachers in this study used the privilege system not to punish or shame learners, but to affirm their dignity through recognition and inclusion. The process of earning privileges through effort and respect allows learners to experience success and competence, core elements of dignity-based discipline. Rather than focusing on deficits, the system acknowledges each learner's potential for growth, thereby fostering agency and self-regulation. As one participant explained, learners are evaluated for "good behaviour" and "given marks" that make them feel valued for positive choices rather than condemned for mistakes.

In this sense, the privilege system operates as a restorative and motivational tool, promoting a classroom climate where correction is grounded in empathy and encouragement. This echoes Curwin et al.'s (2018) assertion that dignified discipline supports behavioural improvement through respectful engagement, not fear or humiliation. Consequently, the privilege system in these special schools upholds learners' sense of belonging and personal worth, aligning with DDT's vision of discipline as a pathway to growth rather than exclusion.

Learners' Code of Conduct

The South African Schools Act (RSA, 1996) mandates that all learners adhere to a school's Code of Conduct, which serves as both a legislative and ethical framework grounded in constitutional principles of human dignity, equality, and freedom (RSA, 1996; Letuma & Mmodana-Zide, 2025). Within special-school contexts,

teachers in this study regarded the code as a crucial structure for promoting positive behaviour and maintaining order. However, through the lens of DDT, the code extends beyond a regulatory function to become a dignity-preserving disciplinary instrument that encourages teachers to uphold empathy, fairness, and respect in their disciplinary practices. Its foundation lies in three core components, prevention, action, and resolution (Mestry & Khumalo, 2012), which collectively guide schools toward proactive and humane management of learner behaviour.

The preventive component requires School Governing Bodies (SGBs) to establish measures that pre-empt misconduct and reduce the stress associated with classroom behavioural challenges. The action dimension involves implementing well-documented and strategic responses to persistent disciplinary issues that arise despite preventive efforts, ensuring that interventions remain constructive rather than punitive. The resolution dimension focuses on strategies to address recurring or severe misbehaviour by fostering dialogue, problem-solving, and rehabilitation rather than exclusion or punishment (Letuma & Mgodana-Zide, 2025).

In special schools, the implementation of the code reflects these principles by prioritising restoration over retribution. It promotes self-worth, belonging, and responsibility while ensuring that corrective measures uphold the dignity of learners. This approach aligns with DDT's focus on developing internal discipline through inclusion and mutual respect, viewing learners as active participants in behavioural growth rather than passive recipients of control. Consequently, discipline becomes an educative process that nurtures moral development rather than a mechanism for enforcing compliance.

Nevertheless, applying the Code of Conduct in special-school settings remains challenging, as learner indiscipline is often intertwined with disability-related traits and contextual factors (Celis et al., 2023; Ghorbaninejad et al., 2020; Pienaar & Dreyer, 2024). Such factors may lead teachers to display leniency when enforcing behavioural systems (Mokano & Letuma, 2025), given the complex realities of communication barriers, socio-economic deprivation, and family-related stressors. Strict enforcement may, therefore, conflict with learners' developmental and emotional needs, compelling teachers to strike a balance between compassion and accountability. These challenges can constrain the practical realisation of DDT, as educators seek to preserve dignity while navigating diverse behavioural and contextual complexities.

One-on-one communication

Teacher-student relationships are essential for student engagement and school learning (Quill & Kahu, 2022). The study's findings show that teachers address indiscipline among special education learners through customised communication for each student. Establishing strong connections between teachers and learners is essential for effectively managing the classroom environment. By promoting effective communication, educators can provide tailored assistance and guidance to students with diverse abilities, cultivating a more collaborative and inclusive learning environment. According to Juta and Van Wyk (2020), positive relationships between educators and learners can help prevent disruptive behaviour. The theory underlying the study emphasises the importance of preserving the dignity of individuals with special needs. High (2018) notes that individuals with varying abilities can demonstrate independence and dignity by expressing themselves freely.

Therapeutic activities

The findings of this study revealed that other teachers prefer therapeutic activities to address indiscipline. Shultz et al. (2017) noted that therapeutic recreational activities, such as sports, music, and dance, can enhance the quality of life for individuals with disabilities. Azizah and Ariani (2020) found that play therapy is particularly suitable for children facing various challenges. It can effectively address the emotional and behavioural needs of children who struggle to manage their emotions. Through play therapy, children can express their feelings both verbally and non-verbally.

The challenges that teachers face when addressing indiscipline in special schools

The findings revealed that teachers experience various issues, including communication barriers and a lack of clear guidelines for learner discipline and professional development.

Communication barriers

Successful communication and effective language development form the foundation for all children's social and emotional growth. More importantly, they are crucial for learners who are hard of hearing (Shoko, 2024). Their absence poses serious challenges that can significantly harm their interpersonal behaviour and overall development within the school environment. Indeed, research consistently demonstrates that communication impairment has a negative impact on academic achievement,

social integration, and essential developmental outcomes (Idris & Badzis, 2017). This reality is underscored by the alarming fact that, according to Ngobeni et al. (2020), an astonishing 90% of South African educators lack competence in South African Sign Language (SASL). This widespread incompetence immediately and profoundly creates a communication gap.

The consequences of this communication breakdown are far-reaching. Idris and Badzis (2017) note that children with hearing disabilities often exhibit externalised behaviours at school and home. While parents seek special school environments that foster good relationships between the children and teachers, this potential is continuously undermined by existing communication gaps. SASL incompetence not only incapacitates effective teaching but can also lead to misunderstandings and misinterpretations of learners' behaviour, subjecting them to unwarranted disciplinary actions and further marginalisation (Shoko, 2024).

Unfortunately, most educators often feel frustrated when using interventions or sanctions because they struggle to communicate effectively with learners who are hard of hearing (Jordan, 2016). The inability to communicate renders even well-planned initiatives redundant and may inadvertently exacerbate behavioural issues.

The findings of this study also highlight the significant issues teachers face in addressing learners' use of sign language. These observations are consistent with the findings of Shoko (2024), which show that individuals who are hard of hearing may exhibit behaviours that are readily misinterpreted. These issues, which have far-reaching implications for the learning process among deaf learners, arise directly from the poor communication between the learners and the teachers. The findings suggest that teachers should prioritise discovering and addressing the specific needs of their learners with dignity and respect, and this begins with the ability to communicate effectively. Without this fundamental skill, meaningful inclusion remains an elusive dream.

Limited guidelines and training

The Screening, Identification, Assessment and Support (SIAS) policy outlines the process for identifying and assessing learners with special needs or learning difficulties. It provides relevant interventions for individuals with disabilities (DBE, 2014). The lack of clarity regarding the implementation of policies presents a significant challenge in delivering inclusive education to learners with special needs (Adewumi & Mosito, 2019). Similarly, this study further revealed that special schools face challenges due to the absence of clear guidelines. According to Ra-

mukumba et al. (2019), a policy with clear strategies and procedures can facilitate the successful implementation of a programme.

Furthermore, the study revealed that teachers in special schools encounter various obstacles when managing indiscipline. One of these is the lack of training. The study's findings align with previous research conducted by Pienaar and Dreyer (2024), which showed that teachers faced numerous challenges in dealing with individuals with special needs. Pienaar and Dreyer (2024) asserted that the absence of training hampers teachers' ability to manage indiscipline effectively. According to Perry and Booth (2024), teacher professional development is crucial as it supports teachers in the holistic improvement of their teaching practice across three critical areas: pedagogy, content, and embodiment.

Poverty and limited Parental involvement

The findings of this study are consistent with the existing literature, which indicates that complex ecological and contextual dynamics influence parental involvement in education. Berkowitz et al. (2021), in a California-based study, highlight that socio-economic status (SES), racial background, and a child's age significantly influence the degree of parental engagement. However, they further argue that active school efforts to engage parents and acknowledge cultural differences are equally crucial for meaningful participation. Similarly, Almalki et al. (2021) found in Saudi Arabia that parental involvement in transitional planning for learners with intellectual disabilities was limited, not due to indifference, but to inadequate school outreach and competing societal obligations.

Comparable patterns emerge in South Africa, where poverty and social hardship constrain parental engagement in learners' schooling. Luxomo and Motala (2012) observe that in impoverished communities, parents often prioritise survival needs over educational participation. Reliance on social grants and the school nutrition programme, though essential for alleviating immediate hardship, does little to address long-term parental detachment from the schooling process. Ntshangase (2025) similarly connect poor learner discipline to the effects of poverty, noting that children of disengaged parents are more prone to behavioural difficulties. Evidence from School B corroborates this, with teachers reporting that some parents view special schools as "dumping grounds", reflecting a profound disconnection between home and school responsibilities.

From a DDT perspective, this disconnection has direct implications for teachers' ability to apply dignity-preserv-

ing disciplinary strategies. Poverty and limited parental involvement weaken the relational foundation necessary for mutual respect, empathy, and consistent behavioural expectations, the principles that DDT promotes. Teachers struggling to reach absent or overburdened parents may find it challenging to build rapport, understand the learner's whole social and emotional context, or ensure continuity between home and school discipline practices. Consequently, learners may experience fragmented messages about acceptable behaviour, making it harder for teachers to foster internal discipline grounded in dignity, fairness, and self-regulation. In such contexts, DDT implementation requires not only teacher sensitivity but also systemic efforts to strengthen home-school partnerships, provide social support, and empower parents as co-partners in cultivating dignified behaviour among learners.

Applying Discipline with Dignity Theory to the Findings

The findings reveal both the embodiment and the practical constraints of Discipline with Dignity Theory (DDT) within special-school contexts. DDT advocates for discipline that preserves learners' dignity through empathy, fairness, and respect (Curwin & Mendler, 2018). Teachers in this study demonstrated these principles through personalised, restorative, and relational strategies; however, these ideals were frequently tested by contextual realities, such as communication barriers, inadequate training, and socio-economic hardship.

Teachers' use of one-on-one conversations exemplifies DDT's emphasis on relationship-building and respect for individuality. For instance, when M3 (School A) explained referring a learner to youth care workers or psychologists after personal engagement, this action reflected DDT's restorative principle, addressing underlying causes rather than merely reacting to behaviour. Such interactions embody DDT's belief that effective discipline begins with understanding the learner's emotional and developmental context. Similarly, therapeutic activities, as described by M1 (School A), operationalise DDT's commitment to self-worth and belonging by using creativity and participation to foster self-expression and self-control. In these instances, teachers' practices transformed discipline into a process of healing and growth, rather than a punitive approach.

The privilege system represents another instance of DDT's practical application. Rooted in the Circle of Courage framework, it fosters respect and accountability without resorting to humiliation or shame. By awarding points for effort and cooperation, teachers encouraged learners to experience a sense of dignity through achieve-

ment and recognition. As Curwin et al. (2018) suggest, such dignity-based reinforcement cultivates intrinsic motivation rather than compliance born of fear. However, as M1 and M3 noted, maintaining this system required ongoing observation and feedback, which was demanding in overcrowded or resource-limited classrooms, revealing DDT's dependence on sustained teacher attention and support structures.

Conversely, several challenges highlighted in the data illustrate tensions between DDT's ideals and the realities of special-school environments. Communication barriers, for example, directly hinder the empathetic dialogue central to DDT. As M4 (School B) reflected, misunderstandings arising from limited proficiency in South African Sign Language often led to misplaced disciplinary actions. This contradicts DDT's core principle of informed understanding before intervention, underscoring how structural barriers can erode teachers' capacity to act with dignity and fairness.

Likewise, the lack of clear guidelines and training constrains teachers' ability to apply DDT consistently. Participants noted that discipline training was outdated or irrelevant to their current contexts, forcing them to rely on improvisation rather than principle-based decision-making. This limits the enactment of DDT's preventive and resolution components (Mestry & Khumalo, 2012), as teachers are left without institutional scaffolding to sustain reflective, restorative practices.

The impact of poverty and limited parental involvement further complicates the operationalisation of DDT. As the findings from School B suggest, some parents perceive special schools as "dumping grounds," which can result in weak home-school collaboration. From a DDT perspective, this absence of parental partnership disrupts the continuity of dignity-preserving strategies across environments. Teachers struggle to maintain consistent behavioural expectations or to understand the "whole child," making rapport-building and empathy-driven intervention more difficult. Consequently, the burden of moral and behavioural guidance rests solely on teachers, who must balance compassion with accountability in contexts of deep socio-economic strain.

Collectively, these findings demonstrate that while teachers' strategies, such as therapeutic engagement, restorative dialogue, and privilege-based motivation, strongly reflect DDT's ideals, contextual constraints, including inadequate resources, policy ambiguity, and poverty, impede the full realisation of those ideals. DDT's explanatory power lies in its ability to illuminate how dignity, belonging, and empathy underpin effective disci-

pline; however, its practical limitations in special-school contexts reveal a need for systemic reinforcement through professional development, inclusive communication training, and community engagement. Thus, the study extends DDT by illustrating that dignity-based discipline cannot thrive in isolation but requires an ecosystem of relational, institutional, and social support.

Limitations of the study

This study was constrained in scope, examining only two special schools within one province, out of nine provinces. Only three educators from each school participated, limiting the sample size. Data were exclusively gathered via semi-structured interviews. The study concentrated solely on the strategies employed by teachers, without assessing their effectiveness. This qualitative study, utilising a phenomenological design, reveals individuals' own experiences and may lack generalisability to other contexts.

Future research

Building on the current findings, future research should adopt a broader and more comparative approach to deepen understanding of discipline management in special schools. Larger, multi-site studies, combining qualitative and quantitative methods, would allow for generalisable insights into how teachers' disciplinary strategies influence learner behaviour across diverse special-needs contexts. In particular, future studies should examine the effectiveness of targeted communication interventions in settings where language and hearing barriers persist, as well as evaluate how sustained professional development initiatives enhance teachers' capacity to apply dignity-centred discipline. Longitudinal or comparative studies across different categories of special schools could further clarify which approaches are most effective in promoting positive behaviour and inclusion. Such research would not only validate the present study's findings but also guide evidence-based policy and training programmes within the South African education system.

CONCLUSION

This study explored how teachers in special schools manage indiscipline and the challenges they face. Guided by the Discipline with Dignity Theory, the findings revealed that teachers employ strategies such as privilege systems,

individual conversations, learners' codes of conduct, and therapeutic activities. These approaches uphold dignity and promote self-worth among learners. However, systemic barriers, particularly communication difficulties, inadequate training, limited parental involvement, and socio-economic constraints, undermine the consistent application of these strategies.

Most critically, the Department of Basic Education should prioritise regular, context-specific professional development for teachers in special schools, focusing on practical disciplinary approaches for learners with varied needs. Equally important is the need for clear, practical guidelines to ensure consistency in managing indiscipline while preserving learners' dignity. Furthermore, efforts to strengthen parental involvement must be intensified, as weak home-school collaboration exacerbates behavioural challenges. Finally, mitigating communication barriers, especially with Deaf learners, through improved tools and specialised training, remains indispensable for dignified and effective discipline.

This study makes a unique contribution by applying the Discipline with Dignity Theory within special schools, illustrating how dignity-centred approaches can foster constructive behaviour in contexts of complex learner needs. It highlights not only the strategies teachers employ but also the systemic constraints that shape their practice, highlighting the need for responsive, context-sensitive support in inclusive education settings.

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DECLARATION OF INTEREST STATEMENT

The authors reported no potential conflict of interest.

ETHICAL CONSIDERATION

The study received approval from the authorities at the University of the Free State, with ethical number UFS-HSD2024/1446, as well as from the Department of Basic Education in the Free State. Participants provided their consent. Before participating in the study, all participants completed an informed consent form. The identities of the individuals were safeguarded through pseudonyms.

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