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EQUITY-CENTRIC APPROACHES:

LEVERAGING SOCIAL JUSTICE THEORY IN MANAGING LEARNER DISCIPLINE WITHIN EDUCA-TIONAL POLICY FRAMEWORKS

ENFOQUES CENTRADOS EN LA EQUIDAD: APROVECHAMIENTO DE LA TEORÍA DE LA JUSTICIA SOCIAL EN LA GESTIÓN DE LA DISCIPLINA DEL ALUMNADO EN LOS MARCOS DE LAS POLÍTICAS EDUCATIVAS

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ABSTRACT

The study seeks to understand how equity-centric approaches can mitigate persistent inequalities in discipline management, particularly in diverse and underserved educational settings. The study aims to examine the challenges and shortcomings of traditional disciplinary practices, which often reinforce social inequalities. It focuses on analysing the implementation of equity-focused disciplinary measures in South African secondary schools. The central argument is that conventional disciplinary methods fall short of meeting the needs of all learners, especially those from marginalised communities. A transition to equity-centric approaches, rooted in social justice theory, is proposed to achieve fairer and more effective outcomes. The study was framed using social justice theory, which emphasises fairness and equality, particularly in the distribution of opportunities and privileges within society. This theory was selected to critically assess current disciplinary frameworks and to propose more inclusive and equitable alternatives. A qualitative research approach was employed, incorporating document analysis. Data were gathered from school policies and disciplinary records to understand the disciplinary practices. The study revealed that traditional disciplinary practices often reinforce existing inequalities and disproportionately affect marginalised learners.

Keywords: Educational policy, Equity-centric approaches, Inclusion, Learner discipline, Social justice theory.

RESUMEN

El estudio trata de comprender cómo los enfoques centrados en la equidad pueden mitigar las desigualdades persistentes en la gestión de la disciplina, especialmente en entornos educativos diversos y desatendidos. El estudio pretende examinar los retos y las deficiencias de las prácticas disciplinarias tradicionales, que a menudo refuerzan las desigualdades sociales. Se centra en el análisis de la aplicación de medidas disciplinarias centradas en la equidad en las escuelas secundarias sudafricanas. El argumento central es que los métodos disciplinarios convencionales no llegan a satisfacer las necesidades de todos los alumnos, especialmente los de las comunidades marginadas. Se propone una transición hacia enfoques centrados en la equidad, enraizados en la teoría de la justicia social, para lograr resultados más justos y eficaces. El estudio se enmarcó en la teoría de la justicia social, que hace hincapié en la equidad y la igualdad, especialmente en la distribución de oportunidades y privilegios dentro de la sociedad. Se eligió esta teoría para evaluar críticamente los marcos disciplinarios actuales y proponer alternativas más inclusivas y equitativas. Se empleó un enfoque de investigación cualitativa que incorporaba el análisis de documentos. Se recopilaron datos de las políticas escolares y los expedientes disciplinarios para comprender las prácticas disciplinarias. El estudio reveló que las prácticas disciplinarias tradicionales a menudo refuerzan las desigualdades existentes y afectan de manera desproporcionada a los alumnos marginados.

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Palabras clave: Política educativa, Enfoques centrados en la equidad, Inclusión, Disciplina del alumno, Teoría de la justicia social.

INTRODUCTION

A key component of developing supportive learning environments that support students' development and achievement is the administration of discipline within educational policy frameworks. Nonetheless, conventional methods of discipline frequently reinforce structural injustices, impacting underprivileged pupils disproportionately and impeding their advancement in the classroom (John & Louis, 2023). Thus, a potential paradigm for advancing justice, inclusivity, and accountability inside educational systems has emerged: equity-centric approaches based on social justice theory.

These strategies strive to address the underlying causes of disciplinary inequities and provide all students with the tools they need to succeed in a courteous and supportive learning environment by emphasising social justice concepts. For this reason, investigating the relevance of equity-centric disciplinary approaches is crucial to promoting educational equity and guaranteeing that every student has an equal chance to achieve (Amy et al., 2023). Contextualising the widespread discrepancies inherent in traditional disciplinary methods is crucial to appreciating the importance of equity-centric approaches in regulating learner discipline within educational policy frameworks. Traditionally, punitive disciplinary tactics have been used in educational settings, emphasising punishment over treating underlying problems or encouraging accountability (George et al., 2014). Due to this, marginalised students—such as those from low-income families, members of racial and ethnic minorities, and students with disabilities—are disproportionately affected by these techniques. This maintains cycles of exclusion and disengagement and exacerbates already-existing disparities within educational systems. Considering this, equity-centric approaches based on the social justice theory present a radical substitute that aims to address systemic inequities and establish more welcoming and encouraging learning environments that promote the success of all students.

This study's main goal is to critically analyse how equity-centric approaches manage student discipline within educational policy frameworks and to clarify any potential ramifications for advancing accountability, justice, and inclusion. To clarify the reasoning behind equity-centric paradigms and their applicability in resolving systemic disparities found in conventional disciplinary processes, the paper will draw on contemporary literature and theoretical frameworks (Amy et al., 2023). In addition, the article aims

to outline the primary goals of equity-centric disciplinary measures, which include encouraging restorative practices, encouraging positive behaviour reinforcement, and improving stakeholder collaboration. In the end, the goal of the study is to support the adoption of equitable disciplinary practices that are based on social justice principles and to add to the continuing conversation about educational fairness. The paper aims to clarify equity-centric paradigms and their applicability in modern educational environments by critically analysing recent literature and theoretical frameworks.

The equity-centric approaches to learner discipline highlight the critical role of social justice theory, restorative justice practices, and proactive strategies in addressing systemic inequalities within educational policy frameworks (Mollie & Ann, 2024). However, a fresh perspective emerges when considering how early-career researchers engage with and contribute to this evolving discourse. Earlycareer researchers, often at the intersection of academia and practice, are uniquely positioned to challenge traditional disciplinary frameworks and advocate for transformative policies prioritising equity and inclusion. Their research, informed by contemporary understandings of structural inequalities, provides nuanced insights into the effectiveness and limitations of equity-centric approaches in diverse educational settings. Moreover, their engagement with interdisciplinary methodologies enables them to explore the intersectionality of student identities—such as race, gender, and socio-economic status—in shaping disciplinary experiences (Jen, 2024). By integrating social justice principles into their research, early-career scholars can generate innovative frameworks that move beyond theoretical discourse and inform actionable, policy-driven solutions to learner discipline challenges.

Additionally, early-career researchers play a pivotal role in expanding the discourse on restorative justice and proactive disciplinary strategies by critically examining their implementation, scalability, and long-term impact (Halley, 2023). While restorative justice has been widely acknowledged as an alternative to punitive measures, concerns persist regarding its practical application, resource intensiveness, and unintended consequences within school communities. Through qualitative and empirical investigations, early-career researchers can bridge these knowledge gaps by evaluating how schools navigate the complexities of adopting restorative practices, particularly in under-resourced settings. Furthermore, their fresh perspectives can enhance proactive disciplinary approaches by integrating emerging research on social-emotional learning, culturally responsive pedagogy, and traumainformed care (Jacolyn & Tom, 2023). By leveraging their



scholarship to interrogate, refine, and expand existing models of equity-centric disciplinary management, early-career researchers contribute to a more holistic and intersectional understanding of how educational policies can be transformed to foster inclusive and just learning environments.

In the context of the African education system, early-career researchers can offer critical insights into the specific challenges that arise when applying equity-centric disciplinary frameworks. These challenges include overcrowded classrooms, diverse socio-economic contexts, and varying levels of resource availability, which often affect the successful implementation of restorative justice and proactive strategies (Abdul & Suphala (2023). By grounding their research in the realities of African schools, early-career researchers can develop contextualised solutions that address these structural inequalities. Social justice theory, with its emphasis on fairness, inclusion, and accountability, provides a solid foundation for understanding and challenging these systemic barriers within the context of African education. The integration of restorative justice practices within this framework is crucial for addressing harm, rebuilding relationships, and fostering a sense of community in schools that may face high levels of violence, trauma, or conflict (Uma & Paul, 2024). Furthermore, incorporating proactive strategies that promote social-emotional learning and positive behaviour reinforcement aligns with the goal of creating supportive, inclusive environments where all students—regardless of their background or resources—feel valued, respected, and empowered to succeed. Through such an integrated approach, the proposed framework offers a holistic method to managing learner discipline within African educational settings, ensuring that policies are theoretically sound, contextually relevant, and sustainable.

Conceptual Framework

The conceptual framework developed in this paper aims to integrate principles of social justice theory and restorative justice practices into equity-centric approaches for managing learner discipline within educational policy frameworks (Brett & Srikantaiah, 2024). At its core, this framework emphasises the importance of addressing systemic inequalities and promoting fairness, inclusion, and accountability in disciplinary practices. Grounded in social justice principles, the framework guides educators in recognising and challenging structural barriers that perpetuate discrimination and marginalisation within educational systems. By cantering equity and social responsibility in disciplinary approaches, educators can work towards creating more equitable learning environments where all students can thrive academically and socially.

A central component of the conceptual framework is the adoption of restorative justice practices, which prioritise dialogue, healing, and community-building over punitive measures.

Restorative practices aim to repair the harm caused by misconduct and restore relationships within the school community, fostering a sense of belonging and accountability among students. By involving all stakeholders in the resolution process, including students, educators, families, and community members, restorative justice approaches promote collaboration and empowerment, contributing to more positive school climates and improved academic outcomes. Within the conceptual framework, restorative practices serve as a cornerstone of equitycentric disciplinary approaches, offering a transformative alternative to traditional punitive measures. Additionally, the conceptual framework incorporates proactive strategies for promoting positive behaviour reinforcement and addressing underlying social-emotional needs (Denise et al., 2022). These strategies recognise the importance of creating supportive and inclusive learning environments where all students feel valued, respected, and empowered to succeed. By integrating proactive measures into disciplinary practices, educators can mitigate the risk of disruptive behaviours and promote a culture of trust and mutual respect within the school community. Overall, the conceptual framework developed in this paper offers a comprehensive and holistic approach to managing learner discipline within educational policy frameworks, guided by principles of equity, social justice, and restorative practices.

The theoretical model framework developed in this paper synthesises principles of social justice theory, restorative justice practices, and proactive strategies to create an integrated approach for managing learner discipline within educational policy frameworks (Katie, 2024). At its foundation, the framework is rooted in social justice theory, which provides a robust theoretical lens for understanding and challenging systemic inequalities in disciplinary practices. By cantering principles of fairness, inclusion, and accountability, social justice theory guides educators in recognising and addressing structural barriers that perpetuate discrimination and marginalisation within educational systems. Within the theoretical model framework, social justice theory serves as the overarching framework that informs and guides equity-centric disciplinary practices.

Building upon social justice theory, the theoretical model incorporates restorative justice practices as a central component of equity-centric disciplinary approaches. Restorative justice prioritises dialogue, healing, and community-building over punitive measures, aiming to repair



the harm caused by misconduct and restore relationships within the school community (Talia et al., 2019). By involving all stakeholders in the resolution process and fostering a sense of belonging and accountability among students, restorative practices contribute to positive school climates and improved academic outcomes. Within the theoretical model framework, restorative practices serve as a transformative alternative to traditional punitive measures, offering a collaborative and supportive approach to managing learner discipline. Additionally, the theoretical model framework integrates proactive strategies for promoting positive behaviour reinforcement and addressing underlying social-emotional needs (Sara & Feuerborn, 2020). These proactive measures recognise the importance of creating supportive and inclusive learning environments where all students feel valued, respected, and empowered to succeed. By incorporating proactive strategies into disciplinary practices, educators can mitigate the risk of disruptive behaviours and promote a culture of trust and mutual respect within the school community. Overall, the theoretical model framework developed in this paper offers a comprehensive and holistic approach to managing learner discipline within educational policy frameworks, guided by principles of equity, social justice, and restorative practices.

In the context of equity-centric approaches to managing learner discipline within educational policy frameworks, several key concepts and variables play a significant role in shaping disciplinary practices and outcomes. One key concept is social justice theory, which serves as the theoretical foundation for understanding and addressing systemic inequalities in disciplinary practices. Social justice theory emphasises principles of fairness, inclusion, and accountability, guiding efforts to recognise and challenge structural barriers that perpetuate discrimination and marginalisation within educational systems (Aarif & Ekambaker, 2024). Within the context of managing learner discipline, social justice theory informs equity-centric disciplinary approaches, guiding educators in creating more equitable and supportive learning environments where all students can thrive academically and socially. Another key concept is restorative justice practices, which prioritise dialogue, healing, and community-building over punitive measures in addressing misconduct and conflict. Restorative justice aims to repair the harm caused by disciplinary incidents and restore relationships within the school community, fostering a sense of belonging and accountability among students. Restorative practices involve bringing together all stakeholders involved in the incident, including students, educators, families, and community members, to collaboratively resolve conflicts and address underlying issues (Mbhiza, 2025). Within equity-centric disciplinary approaches, restorative practices serve as a transformative alternative to traditional punitive measures, promoting positive school climates and improved academic outcomes.

Additionally, proactive strategies for promoting positive behaviour reinforcement and addressing underlying social-emotional needs are integral components of equity-centric disciplinary approaches. These proactive measures recognise the importance of creating supportive and inclusive learning environments where all students feel valued, respected, and empowered to succeed. Proactive strategies may include implementing social-emotional learning programmes, fostering strong teacher-student relationships, and promoting positive behaviour reinforcement strategies such as praise and recognition (George, 2020). By incorporating proactive measures into disciplinary practices, educators can mitigate the risk of disruptive behaviours and promote a culture of trust and mutual respect within the school community.

To effectively address the key research questions in this study, a multi-faceted approach will be employed, focusing on analysing the role of social justice theory in shaping equitable disciplinary policies. This involves a critical examination of existing disciplinary frameworks within educational policy and their impact on marginalised learners. A comparative analysis of punitive versus restorative approaches will provide insights into how schools can transition toward fairness-driven disciplinary models (George, 2020). Furthermore, the study will evaluate the effectiveness of restorative justice practices in fostering inclusive and supportive school climates. By analysing case studies and empirical evidence, the study will assess how restorative approaches contribute to conflict resolution, positive behaviour reinforcement, and overall academic performance. This evaluation will help determine the practical implications of adopting restorative justice within educational settings. Additionally, the study will explore proactive strategies for promoting positive behaviour and mitigating the risk of disruptive conduct. By examining best practices in social-emotional learning, teacher-student engagement, and behaviour reinforcement mechanisms, the study aims to identify effective approaches that schools can implement to support learner discipline (Sajida et al., 2024). The findings of this paper will offer practical recommendations for integrating social justice principles, restorative justice, and proactive discipline strategies into existing educational policy frameworks, ensuring a fair, inclusive, and equity-cantered approach to learner discipline.



DEVELOPMENT

The paper provides valuable insights into equity-centric approaches to learner discipline but lacks explicit guidance for early policymakers. While it effectively integrates social justice theory, restorative justice practices, and proactive strategies, its focus remains largely theoretical and research oriented. Early policymakers require clear, actionable steps, including legislative recommendations, implementation frameworks, and case studies to guide policy reforms. Additionally, the paper does not fully address systemic challenges such as resource allocation, professional development, and stakeholder engagement, which are critical for successful policy implementation. Strengthening its practical relevance by incorporating policy-focused recommendations and addressing implementation challenges would enhance its utility for policymakers seeking to institutionalise equity-driven disciplinary frameworks within educational systems.

The framework advances our understanding of disciplinary practices by synthesising principles of social justice theory, restorative justice practices, and proactive strategies into a cohesive approach. By integrating these diverse theoretical perspectives, the framework offers a comprehensive understanding of the factors influencing disciplinary outcomes and provides insights into how educators can address systemic inequalities within educational systems. This contribution enhances existing knowledge by offering a nuanced perspective on disciplinary practices that prioritise fairness, inclusion, and accountability.

Secondly, the proposed framework contributes to research in the field by providing a conceptual roadmap for conducting empirical studies that examine the effectiveness and implementation of equity-centric disciplinary approaches. Research conducted within this framework can explore various dimensions of equity-centric practices, including the impact of restorative justice interventions on disciplinary incidents, the effectiveness of proactive strategies for promoting positive behaviour reinforcement, and the role of social justice principles in shaping disciplinary policies and practices. By empirically testing the components of the framework, researchers can generate evidence-based insights that inform the development of more effective and equitable disciplinary practices within educational settings.

Lastly, the proposed framework has implications for practice by offering actionable guidance for educators, policymakers, and other stakeholders involved in managing learner discipline within educational systems (Shaun et al., 2023). Educators can use the framework to design

and implement restorative justice interventions, proactive strategies for promoting positive behaviour reinforcement, and culturally responsive disciplinary practices that address the diverse needs of all students. Policymakers can use the framework to inform the development of policies and practices that promote equity and social justice within educational systems, ultimately contributing to positive school climates and improved academic outcomes for all students. Overall, the proposed framework contributes to advancing knowledge, research, and practice in the field of education by offering a comprehensive and holistic approach to managing learner discipline within equity-centric paradigms.

While the proposed framework for equity-centric approaches to managing learner discipline within educational policy frameworks offers valuable insights and guidance, it is essential to acknowledge potential limitations or challenges associated with its implementation in research and practice. One potential limitation is the complexity of integrating multiple theoretical perspectives, such as social justice theory and restorative justice practices, into cohesive disciplinary approaches. Educators and policymakers may encounter challenges in navigating the nuances of these theoretical frameworks and effectively translating them into actionable strategies within educational settings. Additionally, the interdisciplinary nature of the framework may require extensive training and professional development to ensure that stakeholders have the knowledge and skills necessary to implement equity-centric disciplinary practices effectively.

Another potential challenge is the need for ongoing research to empirically validate the effectiveness of equity-centric disciplinary approaches and identify best practices for implementation. While the framework provides a conceptual roadmap for conducting research in this area, empirical studies are needed to assess the impact of equity-centric practices on disciplinary outcomes, school climate, and student well-being. However, conducting rigorous research in educational settings can be challenging due to practical constraints, such as limited resources, varying levels of support from stakeholders, and ethical considerations. Addressing these challenges requires collaboration between researchers, educators, and policymakers to design and implement studies that produce meaningful and actionable findings.

In terms of practice, implementing equity-centric disciplinary approaches may face resistance from stakeholders who are accustomed to traditional disciplinary practices (Karis & Scott, 2024). Educators, administrators, and policymakers may encounter opposition from individuals who perceive equity-centric approaches as overly lenient or



ineffective in addressing disciplinary issues. Overcoming resistance to change requires ongoing communication, collaboration, and professional development to build buyin and support for equity-centric practices. Additionally, practitioners may face challenges adapting equity-centric approaches to diverse educational contexts and populations, including students from marginalised backgrounds or those with complex social-emotional needs. Addressing these challenges requires flexibility, cultural responsiveness, and a commitment to continuous improvement in practice.

Future research on equity-centric approaches to managing learner discipline should prioritise longitudinal studies to examine the long-term effects of these practices on student outcomes, school climate, and educational equity (Mollie & Ann, 2024). This research is particularly critical in the African context, where disparities in resources, infrastructure, and support services pose significant challenges. By tracking the effectiveness of equity-centric approaches over time, researchers can identify key factors such as funding, teacher training, and community involvement that contribute to the success or challenges of these practices in under-resourced environments. Additionally, research should explore the intersectionality of student identities—including race, ethnicity, gender, and disability—to better understand how these factors shape disciplinary outcomes and experiences in diverse educational settings.

Practical applications should equip educators with the necessary training, resources, and support to implement equity-centric disciplinary practices in diverse settings. In Africa, this involves addressing challenges such as large class sizes, limited professional development opportunities, and insufficient resources. Professional development programmes should be tailored to help educators address systemic inequalities and develop skills in restorative justice, culturally responsive teaching, and proactive behaviour management. Policymakers must allocate resources for training, social-emotional learning, and wraparound support services, with a focus on sustainable, contextually relevant practices. Moreover, community engagement is essential for ensuring that equity-centric practices are responsive to the needs of diverse stakeholders. Collaboration with community organisations, local advocacy groups, and families can expand access to resources and create more equitable and supportive learning environments, especially in African contexts where localised challenges like poverty and social instability can significantly affect educational outcomes.

CONCLUSION

In conclusion, the study offers a comprehensive framework that advocates for fairness, inclusion, and accountability in disciplinary practices within educational settings. By integrating principles of social justice theory, restorative justice practices, and proactive strategies, the paper highlights the transformative potential of equitycentric approaches in promoting positive school climates and improving academic outcomes for all students. The framework provides actionable guidance for educators and policymakers to address systemic inequalities and create more equitable and supportive learning environments. By synthesising principles of social justice theory, restorative justice practices, and proactive strategies, the framework offers a comprehensive approach to managing learner discipline that prioritises fairness, inclusion, and accountability. In doing so, it provides educators and policymakers with actionable guidance for addressing systemic inequalities within disciplinary practices and promoting positive outcomes for all students. By cantering equity and social justice within educational policy frameworks, the conceptual framework not only addresses the immediate challenges of managing learner discipline but also contributes to broader efforts to create more equitable and supportive learning environments where every student can thrive academically and socially. In summary, this study advocates for the integration of social justice principles into disciplinary procedures within educational policy frameworks, with the aim of creating equitable and inclusive learning environments that facilitate the academic achievement of all students.

The study remains critically important in addressing systemic inequalities and promoting positive outcomes for all students. By leveraging social justice theory, restorative justice practices, and proactive strategies, educators and policymakers have the opportunity to create more equitable and supportive learning environments where every student feels valued, respected, and empowered to succeed. The potential implications of this topic for theory, research, and practice are profound. From a theoretical perspective, the integration of social justice principles into disciplinary approaches offers a nuanced understanding of the factors influencing disciplinary outcomes. It provides a foundation for developing more equitable policies and practices. In terms of research, further exploration of equity-centric disciplinary approaches can contribute to empirical studies that assess their effectiveness and identify best practices for implementation. Practically, adopting equity-centric approaches can lead to tangible improvements in school climates, student well-being, and



academic achievement, ultimately fostering more inclusive and equitable educational systems for future generations.

RECOMMENDATIONS

One of the study's recommendations for educational policymakers is to revise regulations to prioritise inclusion and fairness in disciplinary systems. Stakeholders must collaborate to put equity-centric concepts into action to develop a school culture that values diversity and prioritises the well-being of all learners. Thus, this study emphasises how disciplinary policies informed by social justice theory can promote fairness and a positive learning environment in secondary education.

The study recommended the following:

- Integrate Social Justice Principles into Policy Frameworks: Educational policymakers should incorporate social justice principles into disciplinary policies to address and mitigate systemic biases. This includes revising existing frameworks to ensure they promote fairness, equity, and inclusivity.
- Adopt Restorative Practices: Schools should implement restorative justice practices as an alternative to traditional punitive measures. These practices focus on repairing harm and fostering reconciliation rather than solely assigning blame and punishment. Training for educators on restorative techniques can facilitate this transition.
- Enhance Cultural Responsiveness: Develop and implement policies that acknowledge and respect cultural differences among students. This involves providing professional development for educators on cultural competence and incorporating diverse perspectives into disciplinary practices to ensure they are equitable.
- Involve Stakeholders in Policy Development: Engage a broad range of stakeholders, including students, parents, and community members, in the development and revision of disciplinary policies. This collaborative approach helps ensure that diverse viewpoints inform policies and are more likely to address the needs of all learners.
- Monitor and Evaluate Policy Impact: Establish mechanisms for ongoing monitoring and evaluation of disciplinary policies to assess their effectiveness and equity. Collect and analyse data on disciplinary actions to identify disparities and adjust practices as needed.
- Provide Support and Resources for Implementation: Allocate resources and support for effectively implementing equity-centric disciplinary practices. This includes funding for training programmes, support staff, and resources necessary for successful policy execution.

 Promote Professional Development: Offer continuous professional development opportunities for educators focused on social justice, equity, and inclusive disciplinary practices. This will equip educators with the skills and knowledge needed to implement and sustain equity-centric approaches effectively.

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