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In Loco Parentis and Positive Discipline: Building Schools as Character Building Communities

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Abstract:
This study aims to explore proactive discipline strategies in preventing indisciplined actions in public secondary schools. Using a qualitative approach and case study design, data were collected through focused group discussions involving students, teachers, and principals from five institutions. Key findings suggest that an effective discipline strategy consists of three key elements: parental involvement, school leadership that serves as a surrogate parent, and the application of positive discipline. Parents' emotional and communicative involvement has been shown to shape students' character and obedient behavior. The principal's participatory leadership, which is physically present in the school environment, creates a sense of security and strengthens student compliance. Meanwhile, a positive discipline approach that focuses on character development through example, dialogue, and active student involvement can increase intrinsic awareness of disciplinary values. This research makes a conceptual contribution to the development of a collaborative, humanistic, and contextual disciplinary management framework. The practical implications of this study include the need for systemic integration of all three strategies in national education policy to create a sustainable culture of discipline in secondary schools.
Key Words: *Positive Discipline, In Loco Parentis, Parental Involvement*

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INTRODUCTION

The increasing indiscipline of high school is a serious concern in the contemporary education system (Mayer et al., 2021; Muñiz, 2021; Wallace & Joseph-Salisbury, 2022). A purely punitive discipline approach is ineffective in forming students' self-regulation (Bembenutty et al., 2024; Jones et al., 2023; Li et al., 2021). In an increasingly complex social educational context, offenses such as verbal violence, bullying, and defiance often reflect inadequate emotional and social support for students (Lungu, 2025; Paat et al., 2025; Power et al., 2024). Low levels of social-emotional security are strongly correlated with minimal student involvement and a high risk of disciplinary violations (Davis et al., 2024; Espelage et al., 2021; Li et al., 2021). Although structures such as counseling units and character-building programs are available, limitations in implementation and a lack of synergy between schools and parents remain significant obstacles to practical implementation. Therefore, a disciplinary strategy is needed that is

oriented towards strengthening social relations, moral example, and character building through a collaborative and transformative approach.

Several recent studies highlight the effectiveness of a proactive approach in student discipline management. Research conducted by Hsu & Chen (2023) noted that the use of technology, such as school apps and digital platforms, encourages real-time communication between teachers and parents, thus strengthening family involvement in supporting students' positive behavior. Mitsea et al. (2023) found that positive discipline techniques, such as encouragement, behavioral redirection, and logical consequences, were effective in overcoming domination behaviors related to power and attention in elementary school students. Meanwhile, Obeidat et al. (2024) show that the application of positive discipline in international schools significantly contributes to the well-being and academic achievement of students, especially in younger age groups. Moreover, Karatsiori (2023) emphasizes the importance of explicitly teaching disciplinary values to students, so that they can understand the social and moral goals behind the rules, aligning with the principles of positive discipline and democratic theory in education.

Discipline management strategies in high schools are generally still dominated by reactive approaches that focus on administrative punishments and sanctions, such as reprimands, suspensions, or summons of parents. This approach tends to be temporary and does not address the root cause of deviant student behavior. In practice, many schools have struggled to integrate discipline as part of character development and meaningful social relationships. Parental involvement remains formal and minimal, with little initiative, while the role of school leaders tends to be limited to administrative aspects without direct presence that fosters it. On the other hand, students are not given the space to understand and reflect on the meaning of the rules and the consequences of their behavior. This gap indicates that no integrated approach incorporates discipline into a participatory, humanistic, and sustainable educational ecosystem. Therefore, an in-depth exploration of collaborative, proactive, and transformative disciplinary strategies is needed.

This research makes a new contribution to the discourse on discipline management by highlighting the importance of a collaborative and contextual approach. Unlike previous studies that focused heavily on behavioral consequences or the effectiveness of sanctions, this study places social relations at the center of the formation of disciplinary behavior. The uniqueness lies in the simultaneous exploration of three key elements: parental involvement, school leadership in loco parentis, and positive disciplinary approaches, all within the context of public high schools that face their own social and cultural challenges. By employing a qualitative case study design and reflective thematic analysis, this research explored the profound meaning of disciplinary practices that are not only normative but also contextual and humanistic in nature. Another novelty lies in the redefinition of the role of schools as a community of learners

who build disciplinary awareness through example, dialogue, and active participation, not just as a rule-enforcement institution.

This research was conducted to explore in depth proactive discipline strategies implemented in the context of public secondary schools in Mauritius to prevent student indiscipline. With a qualitative approach and case study design, this study focuses on the subjective understanding of students, teachers, and principals regarding the practice of parental involvement, school leadership that serves as a form of in loco parentis, and the implementation of positive discipline approaches. The primary objective of this study is to investigate how the three elements interact to form a participatory, educative, and sustainable culture of discipline. In addition, this research is directed to formulate a conceptual framework for disciplinary strategies based on relationships, dialogue, and empowerment, as an alternative to the conventional approach that is punitive. Thus, this study contributes to the design of a more effective approach to student behavior management, in accordance with the socio-cultural dynamics of contemporary education.

RESEARCH METHOD

This study employs a qualitative approach to explore in-depth proactive discipline strategies for preventing indiscipline in public secondary schools in Mauritius. This approach was chosen because it is capable of capturing the meanings, views, and subjective experiences of informants in complex social contexts (Cho et al., 2022; Pyo et al., 2023; Renjith et al., 2021). The research design employed is a case study design, which enables researchers to thoroughly analyze discipline phenomena within a particular school environment. The case study was chosen because it provided a contextual and in-depth understanding of discipline practices, interactions between educational actors, and strategies used by schools in shaping their discipline culture (Hill et al., 2021; Hossain et al., 2022; Macenski et al., 2022). This research focuses on several public high schools as units of analysis, thus enriching understanding through comparisons between contexts. Through this approach, researchers can explore fundamental dynamics in discipline management, including parental involvement, school leadership, and the application of positive discipline, each of which contributes to the formation of a conducive and safe learning climate.

Data collection was conducted through in-depth focus group discussions with three categories of informants: students, teachers, and principals (Bal et al., 2025; Hennink & Kaiser, 2022; Keemink et al., 2022). The selection of this method is based on the aim of capturing the nuances of collective perception in the school environment. Researchers play a key role as the primary instrument directly involved in data mining, from designing interview guidelines and facilitating discussions to reflecting on and interpreting the data. The research subjects consisted of 25 students, 25 teachers, and five principals who were purposively selected based on their direct involvement in discipline management practices.

The study was conducted in several public secondary schools in Mauritius over a period of two months. To ensure the credibility of the data, source triangulation, member checking, and trail audit techniques were used (Byrne, 2022; Cho et al., 2022; Zairul, 2021). This technique helps ensure that the data obtained accurately represents the informant's authentic views. The following is a table of informant context:

The data were analyzed using the Reflexive Thematic Analysis (RTA) approach, as it provides flexibility and depth of interpretation of the meaning contained in the informant's narrative (Hahn et al., 2025; Layton et al., 2023; Ozanne et al., 2024). The analysis process was carried out in six stages: (1) familiarization with the data through transcription and re-reading; (2) initial coding of relevant units of meaning; (3) search for initial themes; (4) review and refinement of the theme; (5) naming and definition of themes; and (6) the preparation of thematic narratives. This analysis enabled researchers to identify themes such as parental involvement in shaping discipline, the role of leadership in loco parentis, and the participatory application of positive discipline. The credibility of the data is maintained through systematic documentation (audit trail) and critical reflection on the researcher's position (reflexivity). Thus, this analysis not only yields a descriptive but also an interpretive understanding of disciplinary strategies in the socio-cultural context of public secondary schools in Mauritius.

RESULT AND DISCUSSION

Result

Parental Involvement in Student Discipline Management

Parental involvement in student discipline management refers to the active participation of families, especially parents or guardians, in supervising and providing discipline values to children both at home and through cooperation with the school. In this context, the family serves as the first environment in which children learn socially acceptable behaviors. This engagement encompasses not only the issuance of reprimands or punishments, but also open dialogue, emotional support, and constructive communication among parents, children, and the school. In the context of public secondary schools in Mauritius, this study found that a lack of time, attention, and communication from parents had a direct impact on the emergence of deviant behavior of students. Therefore, building synergy between home and school is a crucial strategy in preventing unlawful acts and fostering a sustainable culture of discipline in the educational environment.

The students emphasized that the role of parents is vital in shaping disciplined behavior. One of the students said:

> "It would be nice if parents really got to know their children and spent quality time together. I hardly ever see my parents at home. When I got home, they were already asleep, and when I woke up in the morning, they

were already off to work. It felt like I was living alone at home, without direction and guidance."

This is in line with the statements of other students who underlined the importance of the role of parents in educating children, not only in the academic aspect but also in discipline:

"Parents should show respect to their children. They should explain why a behavior is wrong, not just scold after the mistake has occurred. For example, if I do something bad, I want to know why it was wrong and what the impact is. But sometimes they just get angry without explaining anything, and I get confused myself. This kind of thing doesn't make me learn anything about discipline."

The results of the two interviews above show that students feel less emotionally supported and receive less behavioral guidance from their parents. The absence of meaningful interaction at home causes students to lack an understanding of the consequences of their actions and the importance of discipline. This is relevant to the theme of parental involvement, which serves as a foundational element in shaping children's characters. Lack of control and communication at home has implications for the increased potential for disciplinary action in schools. In this interview, there is also an expectation from students that parents will function as the primary educators who can guide them directly, rather than just handing over disciplinary responsibilities to the school. Therefore, building a collaborative relationship between parents and schools is a must in efforts to prevent deviant behavior among students. Based on this, the forms of parental involvement are presented in Table 1.

Table 1. Parental Involvement and Consequences for Student Discipline

Parent Engagement Practices	Consequences on Student Discipline Behavior
Spend time with the child regularly	Students demonstrate emotional closeness and an obedient attitude
Encourage open communication in the family	Increase students' willingness to listen and accept correction
Establish an intensive relationship with teachers or schools	Facilitates early response to deviant behavior tendencies
Setting an example in everyday attitudes and speech	Help internalize disciplinary values in students' lives

Table 1: Parental involvement plays a crucial role in shaping student disciplinary behavior. Simple practices such as spending time with children regularly have been shown to foster emotional closeness that has implications for students' adherence to rules. Open communication in the family also has a significant impact, which encourages children to be more willing to accept direction and correction with a positive attitude. Intensive relationships between parents and schools strengthen the supervision system, enabling the early detection of potential deviant behavior. In addition, the example that parents show in everyday attitudes and speech serves as a real model that helps students

internalize the values of discipline in daily life. Thus, this table confirms that active parental involvement is not only supportive but also the primary foundation for fostering a consistent and disciplined attitude in students.

Parental involvement in student discipline management has proven to be a key element in shaping student behavior at school. The findings show that students who do not get attention, communication, and role models from parents tend to exhibit indisciplined behavior. Meanwhile, the presence of active and responsive parents has a positive impact on character formation and student compliance with school rules. In the context of education in Mauritius, this strategy has become particularly important, given the increasing number of cases of student misconduct that cannot be addressed solely through institutional approaches. Collaboration between home and school must be strengthened as the foundation of an effective disciplinary system. With continuous parental involvement, schools can create an environment that is more conducive to learning, while also forming a culture of discipline rooted in family values.

The Role of School Leadership as In Loco Parentis in Building a Safe Environment

The concept of in loco parentis refers to the role of educators, especially school leaders, as a substitute for parents, while students are in the school environment. In this framework, school leaders are not only tasked with carrying out administrative functions but also with being morally and socially responsible for ensuring the safety, comfort, and character development of students. This study emphasizes the significance of physical presence and active involvement of school leaders in monitoring areas of the school that are prone to violations, including hallways, canteens, toilets, and classrooms. The presence of a school leader who is visible and easily accessible to students creates a sense of security and builds psychological closeness. In the context of public secondary schools in Mauritius, this approach is considered effective in reducing the number of violations and strengthening disciplinary values. Thus, leadership that plays a role in loco parentis becomes a relevant preventive strategy in building a conducive learning climate.

The students explicitly conveyed the importance of school leaders' presence in daily school life. One of the students stated:

> "I don't feel safe at school. Many students have personal problems and sometimes act out of control. It would be helpful if school leaders went around and were present in our ward. Their presence gives the impression that we are watched and cared for."

This is reinforced by other student statements highlighting the psychological effects of positive discipline and the presence of leaders:

> "If school leaders are visible and active, the school feels safer and more comfortable. We have come to know that school is not a place for arbitrariness. If all students feel this way, I believe the problem of violations will be drastically reduced."

The above interview demonstrates that the physical presence and direct involvement of school leaders hold strong psychological significance for students. They feel supervised and cared for, and are more likely to maintain good behavior if they know that school leaders are actively interacting in their environment. This reinforces the assumption that participatory leadership, not just administrative, plays an important role in shaping a culture of discipline. In this context, the role of the principal as *in loco parentis* is not only symbolic but also concrete, as an authority figure present in the daily lives of students. When students feel the school environment is safe and supported, they will find it easier to follow rules, avoid conflicts, and focus on learning activities. This strategy also helps detect early symptoms of the disorder before it develops into a serious offense. To clarify the contributions of physical presence and school leader involvement, the following is a summary of the narrative in Figure 1.

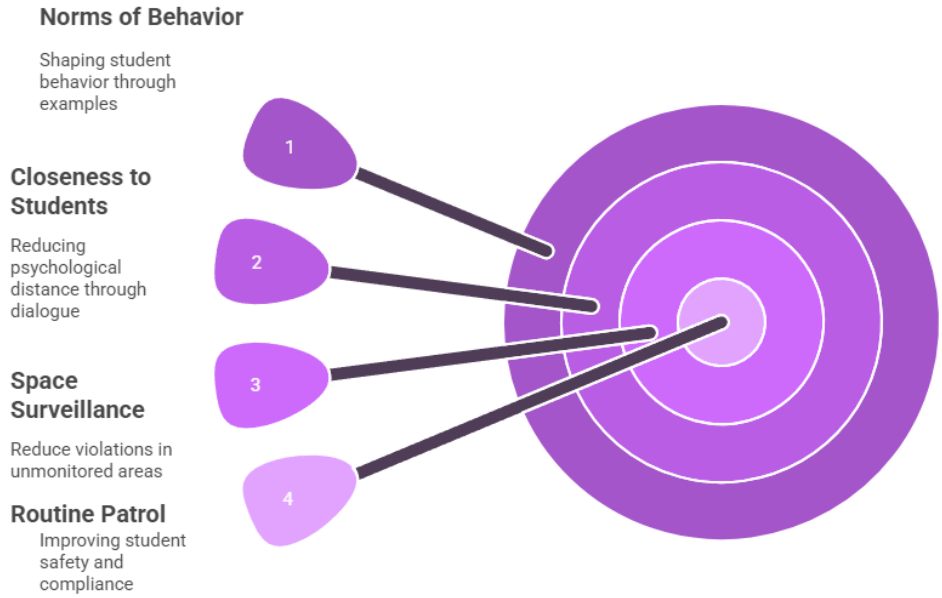


Figure 1. The Role of School Leadership and Its Impact on Discipline

Building on the exposure in Figure 1, the role of school leadership in fostering student discipline is achieved through various complementary strategies. First, the cultivation of norms of behavior is the primary foundation for shaping student behavior through real-life examples, encouraging students to adopt the positive standards set by teachers and school leaders. Second, closeness to students emphasizes the importance of reducing psychological distance through open dialogue, so that students feel heard and valued. Third, space surveillance helps minimize violations in areas that are rarely monitored, underscoring the importance of environmental surveillance in maintaining order and security. Fourth, routine patrols increase security while strengthening student compliance with the rules. This picture as a whole confirms that effective school leadership is not only oriented towards control, but also towards coaching, emotional closeness, and the creation of a safe environment. Thus,

student discipline is formed through a combination of exemplary behavior, effective communication, and a consistent supervision system.

School leadership that performs the role of in loco parentis has proven to make a significant contribution to shaping a safe and conducive learning environment. The findings show that the physical presence of the principal in the school area has a direct impact on student discipline, both through the effect of supervision and the psychological relationships that are built. When students feel the closeness and direct involvement of school authorities, they tend to be more obedient and less likely to engage in deviant behavior. This approach becomes particularly relevant in the context of secondary schools in Mauritius, which face significant challenges related to disciplinary violations. This strategy also enables the early identification of potential conflicts and facilitates preventive actions. Therefore, the role of school leadership needs to be transformed from an administrative function to a social actor that actively forms a strong and sustainable culture of discipline.

Positive Discipline Approach as a Proactive Strategy for Violation Prevention

Positive discipline is an approach that focuses on strengthening students' character and responsibility through coaching, guidance, and example, not through repressive punishments or sanctions. This strategy views students as developing individuals who need to be equipped with life skills, rather than just being controlled through rules. In the context of public secondary schools in Mauritius, this approach emerged as an alternative to conventional disciplinary strategies that were deemed ineffective. Positive discipline emphasizes student empowerment through collaborative activities, learning social values, and reflection on their behavior. The focus is on creating a supportive learning environment, humanizing students, and fostering an intrinsic awareness of the rules. By placing students as active subjects in the character development process, this approach becomes a preventive strategy that not only addresses violations but also fosters a culture of discipline within the school community on an ongoing basis.

The informants indicated that a positive discipline approach had a positive impact on changing students' attitudes at school. One of the principals said:

> "Positive discipline is not just a rule, but about putting the right people in the lives of students. It's a matter of setting an example, such as showing the importance of punctuality. If they see that from us, they learn not from words, but from actions."

This is in line with the views of teachers who are actively involved in this practice:

> "If applied consistently, schools can be a self-regulating mechanism for students. They will understand that values such as honesty and responsibility are not just demands, but part of their lives."

One of the students also shared a perspective that reflected on the effectiveness of this approach:

> "Instead of just being given moral lectures, we understand better if we are directly involved in activities. We can learn discipline through experience, not just commands."

Interviews with principals, teachers, and students reveal that positive discipline serves as a transformational approach, shaping behavior through example, hands-on experience, and educational interactions. Instead of using harsh threats or sanctions, this approach develops students' understanding and awareness of the values underlying the school's rules. From the principal's point of view, example is key. For teachers, positive discipline serves as a framework for students' internal regulation, while for students, active engagement in meaningful activities facilitates the internalization of values. This approach shifts the power relationship in the educational process to be more humanistic and participatory. This demonstrates that discipline is not merely a tool of control, but a process of character development and growth. Therefore, the implementation of positive discipline is a crucial strategy in fostering a school culture that is not only compliant with rules but also morally and socially strong. To provide a concrete illustration, the following is a narrative mapping of the strategies applied and their impact on student behavior as shown in Table 2.

Table 2. Positive Discipline Strategies and Implications for Student Behavior

Positive Discipline Strategy	Implications for Student Behavior
Exemplary attitude by leaders and teachers	Encourage students to imitate consistent positive behaviors
Involvement in meaningful social activities	Fostering responsibility and concern for the environment
Character development through reflective activities	Develop self-awareness and emotion regulation
Dialogue and counseling approach instead of punishment	Increase student openness to guidance and correction

Table 2 explains that positive discipline strategies emphasize character development rather than punishment. The exemplary attitude shown by leaders and teachers is the primary foundation, as students tend to imitate the behavior they consistently see. Additionally, student involvement in social activities provides space for the development of a sense of responsibility and concern for the surrounding environment. Character development through reflective activities also plays a crucial role, as it encourages students to become more aware of themselves and manage their emotions effectively. Dialogue-based and counseling-based approaches replace repressive patterns of punishment, thus creating a more open, constructive, and trusting atmosphere. Overall, this table confirms that positive discipline not only reduces deviant behavior but also has implications for strengthening students' integrity, empathy, and self-awareness in their daily lives.

Positive discipline has proven to be an effective strategy in addressing the complexity of student misconduct in public high schools. Not only does it prevent deviant behavior, but it also forms a strong moral foundation in students through educational interactions, real-life experiences, and examples. Informants report that this strategy enhances self-awareness, fosters a respectful relationship between students and teachers, and cultivates a supportive and safe learning environment. Discipline is no longer viewed as a punishment, but rather as a learning process integrated into school activities. Therefore, integrating positive discipline into educational policies and practices is a strategic necessity for creating a healthy and sustainable school culture. By placing students at the center of character building, this approach has long-term potential to create a responsible and socially conscious generation.

Discussion

The results of this study show that a collaborative and participatory disciplinary strategy is key in preventing student misconduct in public secondary schools in Mauritius. The primary focus on parental involvement, school leadership as in loco parentis, and positive discipline approaches indicates that holistic prevention strategies are more effective than repressive approaches. These findings are particularly relevant to the research's purpose, which seeks to identify proactive strategies that can strengthen the culture of discipline in educational institutions. Given the complexity of student behavior problems that cannot be solved by a single party, synergy among home, school, and community is crucial. Therefore, this discussion will provide an in-depth analysis of the three main themes of the research findings, integrating theories and results from previous studies as a conceptual foundation.

Microenvironments such as the family have a direct influence on the development of children's behaviors (Bembenutty et al., 2024; Li et al., 2021; Wallace & Joseph-Salisbury, 2022). In this case, the quality of parent-child interaction has a significant impact on the formation of discipline attitudes. This study revealed that emotional absenteeism and minimal communication between parents and children correlated with increased deviant behavior. These findings are reinforced by studies by Espelage et al. (2021), which suggest that a lack of parental attention triggers frustration and insecurity in children. In line with this, Power et al. (2024) emphasize that the active involvement of parents in discipline management has been proven to foster a consistent discipline culture. Even Paat et al. (2025) emphasize the importance of a synergistic relationship between schools and parents in instilling values of discipline from an early age. Thus, these findings not only strengthen the existing theoretical foundations but also confirm the need for collaborative systems in managing student behavior.

The concept of in loco parentis, identified in this study, is relevant to the transformational leadership theory proposed by Mayer et al. (2021), which emphasizes the importance of leaders' presence in shaping a positive and safe school climate. The physical presence of the principal in strategic areas of the

school serves as both a form of social control and fosters psychological closeness to students. This finding is consistent with the results of Muñiz's (2021) study, which indicate that the active involvement of the principal has a direct impact on student behavior. Lungu & Boboyi (2025) also noted that unsupervised spaces are prone to deviant behavior. Thus, a participatory leadership approach not only strengthens social regulation but also builds trust-based relationships between leaders and students. These findings confirm that principals must be more than administrators; They need to be authoritative figures who are present and caring.

The positive disciplinary approach revealed in this study aligns with the humanistic approach in education, particularly the theory of self-actualization (Ridwan & Satriawan, 2024). Positive discipline focuses not only on preventing offenses but also on character building through direct experience and example. Jones et al. (2023) state that this approach enables the formation of more stable, long-term behaviors. Meanwhile, the importance of teachers as moral coaches, not just law enforcers, has been emphasized (Malhotra et al., 2023; Moynihan & O'Donovan, 2022; Schrödter et al., 2024). In other words, this approach emphasizes humane and transformative educational relationships, where students are not only obedient out of fear, but because they understand the value behind the rules. These findings show that schools that consistently apply positive discipline tend to have a more supportive and low-conflict learning climate.

Practically, this study offers strategic recommendations for secondary school managers in Mauritius to integrate the role of parents into the discipline management system, increase the physical presence of principals, and implement positive discipline approaches as a new paradigm. Policy implications can take the form of collaborative guidance between schools and families, participatory leadership training, and the integration of experiential character-building programs into the curriculum. Theoretically, this study enriches the discourse on discipline management by reinforcing the relevance of Bronfenbrenner's ecological theory, Leithwood's transformational leadership, and Maslow and Bandura's humanistic educational principles in the context of secondary education. These findings suggest that proactive, collaborative, and participatory prevention strategies are more relevant approaches in contemporary contexts.

Overall, this study emphasizes that effective student discipline management cannot stand alone, but must be built through collaboration between families, schools, and the students themselves. Parental involvement, school leadership that is present in real life, and positive discipline approaches are proven to form a conducive, safe, and transformative learning environment. The findings of this study make an important contribution to the development of educational policies and school practices that prioritize character formation over mere behavioral control. Going forward, further research can explore the systemic integration between these strategies within national education policy frameworks, as well as examine their impact on the longitudinal improvement of school climate.

CONCLUSION

This study confirms that collaborative and transformative discipline management strategies are the most effective approach in preventing disciplinary actions in public secondary schools in Mauritius. Parental involvement proves crucial in shaping student behavior, where emotional presence and intensive communication have a direct impact on adherence to school norms. In addition, school leadership that adopts the role of in loco parentis contributes to the creation of a sense of security and psychological closeness among students, thereby suppressing potential violations. A positive discipline approach that focuses on character building and student empowerment through example, dialogue, and active involvement has also shown high effectiveness in fostering intrinsic awareness of disciplinary values. These findings underscore the importance of synergy among home, school, and social environments in fostering a sustainable culture of discipline. Further research can explore the systemic integration of these three approaches in national education policy.

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