

# Compassionate Discipline: Providing an Inclusive Approach toward Students with Discipline-Related Concerns

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## ABSTRACT

The Philippine State is committed to promoting people's well-being by treating and preventing mental health conditions in a timely, affordable, high-quality, and culturally appropriate manner, as stated in the Mental Health Act [1]. The act aims to integrate strategies for promoting mental health in educational institutions, workplaces, and communities. When managing school discipline, some challenges may arise while implementing and adhering to specific systems. These challenges may negatively impact the school's inclusivity and require some reforms. That's why the school's administrators and the relationships between students and adults hold a significant role in promoting better management of disciplinary cases. Adopting a positive approach that factors in their emotional and social competencies is imperative to manage disciplinary matters with students effectively. A group of 16 Student Discipline Investigating Discipline Officers (IDOs) participated in a Focus Group Discussion (FGD) to discuss how they handle students with disciplinary issues, including those with special needs. The study investigated how cases involving students with mental health issues are managed. It identified factors, gaps, strengths, and areas for improvement. It has been determined that establishing a protocol for students with mental health issues is vital, and the service provider (SDFO) will play a critical role in this process.

**Keywords:** mental health, discipline, student discipline formation, safe spaces

## INTRODUCTION

The term "discipline" originated from the French word "*descepliner*" and the Latin word "*disciplina*," meaning to instruct, train, and educate. "Formation," on the other hand, comes from the Latin word "*formationem*," which means to form, shape, and create ([www.etymonline.com](http://www.etymonline.com)). When these two words are combined, they develop a method of education or training that involves shaping and forming individuals. Disciplinary policies in schools should consider the unique needs of each student to ensure appropriate treatment. Valuing and protecting these differences benefit all students. Mental health conditions should be treated and prevented in timely, affordable, high-quality, and culturally appropriate mental health care [1]. One of the goals of Republic Act No. 11036 is to incorporate tactics that promote mental health in schools, workplaces, and communities.

Each educational institution has its own set of policies and guidelines outlined in a student handbook. Enforcing compliance while ensuring inclusivity and applicability to all students can be challenging. Evaluating protocols and implementing school discipline reforms can establish comprehensive rules. School discipline is often ignored, but it's essential to understand how interventions affect student development and inclusivity. Programs should align with the school's overall approach to promote growth and inclusivity. Studies [2, 3, 4] suggest that school discipline and meeting the needs of students with specific requirements

should be approached holistically and inclusively to benefit the entire student population. As per a 2019 article by the Center for Autism Research [8], it is essential to focus on effective behavior management to avoid disciplinary actions.

Students should be able to access special education services without any limitations, even if a change in placement is required.

The school, its administrators, and the relationships between students and adults are crucial. An integrative model must be applied to ensure that no Filipino child is left behind, aligning with the “no student left behind policy” regarding student services. Disciplinary cases can be challenging for frontline workers without proper training. To ensure fair treatment, schools have a Discipline Office. Careful consideration of mental health is crucial for student development and school discipline. Based on the identified gaps, the study aims to create a brief literature that will assist in recognizing and addressing the essential requirements for students’ disciplinary development. This research seeks to help individuals who are struggling with mental health issues. Additionally, it aims to improve case management and disciplinary processes. Finally, the study hopes to establish a protocol for the SDFO to ensure that students receive appropriate referrals for their well-being.

### **A perspective on discipline and formation among students**

Organizing, creating, and carrying out service-learning activities for students can benefit their positive development by enhancing their social and emotional skills [7]. Catering to students’ needs is essential for their success in university and personal development. This includes service-learning, development programs, and value-based education initiatives.

The use of suspension and expulsion to address students’ misconduct primarily because it can do more harm to the student’s academic progress [2]. Their study on social and emotional learning and equity noted that school discipline, poor achievement, and contact with the juvenile justice system are interconnected. Therefore, it is crucial to have effective management in the school system to ensure that we use disciplinary measures to encourage positive behavior from students rather than desensitize them to misconduct. Utilization of exclusionary discipline can be detrimental, so it is vital to aim for fewer suspensions [2]. Excluding students through disciplinary practices is ineffective in engaging them or improving their educational experiences. Instead, policies should prioritize identifying inclusive practices and implementing socio-emotional learning as a strategy for discipline reform [4].

### **A Social Emotional Learning (SEL) framework for addressing the needs of students with discipline cases**

It is essential to use a positive framework that considers emotional and social skills to manage students with discipline issues better. This is where the Socio-Emotional Learning (SEL) Framework comes in, as it raises awareness of these needs and strengthens the school system’s policies while still treating children ethically and morally [2]. Additionally, school connectedness is a critical protective factor in promoting health equity and preventing at-risk behaviors and adverse outcomes in children and adolescents [10]. Using evidence-based practices can lower academic disengagement and school dropouts, ultimately reducing the likelihood of discipline issues arising.

Schools must have a clear policy and protocol aligning with their positive youth development framework. Including students with mental health concerns in the education system is crucial for their academic development. Social and emotional support can improve engagement, critical thinking skills, and stress management abilities, leading to positive outcomes such as improved academic status and behavior [6]. Implementing educational and restorative strategies in disciplinary actions and teaching skills can lead to a

safer school environment with lower incident rates [6]. Some programs included home visits, positive communication with parents, teaching social-emotional awareness and conflict resolution skills, restorative discipline, mental health support, and mindfulness practices. These approaches aim to replace punitive and threatening methods with a more inclusive, supportive approach.

As per findings, implementing the Social Emotional Learning Framework has a beneficial impact on school discipline for students. This approach involves school reforms, capacity building as a means of systematic change, and promoting alternative thinking strategies that foster self-control, emotional literacy, and social competence [2]. Implementing the SEL framework is crucial for positive youth development, particularly for students with disciplinary and mental health issues. Restorative, supportive, and socially aware approaches are better than harsh and punitive treatments, and they promote a safer school environment for positive youth development.

### **Conceptual Framework**

This study utilizes the Social Emotional Learning Framework developed by CASEL [9], emphasizing five key areas: self-awareness, social competence, relationship building, responsible decision-making, and self-management skills. These guidelines will aid in addressing disciplinary issues among students. Recent studies [2,6] have shown that adopting a more accepting, safe, and nonjudgmental approach can effectively manage students. This study aims to apply the same approach to students with disciplinary cases who may also have mental health issues.

To improve relationships with others, it's essential first to understand oneself. As formators, discipline officers are crucial in supporting students' social and emotional development. The teaching pyramid highlights the interconnectedness between social-emotional development, communication skills, and problematic behavior [5]. Therefore, effective case management strategies are essential to promote socio-emotional competence.

### **METHODOLOGY**

A total of 16 individuals, seven males and nine females, participated in a Focus Group Discussion (FGD) led by the researcher and two other formators. The FGD aimed to gather insights into existing practices and identify potential gaps in handling students with disciplinary issues or mental health concerns.

On November 29, 2019, a Focus Group Discussion (FGD) was conducted with the Student Discipline Investigating Discipline Officers (IDOs). The discussion centered on the IDOs' approach to handling cases related to student discipline, including those involving special needs students. 2-3 formators interviewed groups of 3-4 participants during the 1.5-hour session to ensure that skeletal force in the operations was still maintained. The participants shared their experiences with special needs students, including cases, challenges, and how they managed each. They also discussed their strengths and areas for improvement in handling these situations. The focus group discussion was analyzed to identify themes and develop a disciplinary protocol for students with mental health concerns.

### **RESEARCH FINDINGS AND DISCUSSION**

The study's findings identify factors, gaps, strengths, and areas for improvement in the current handling of students with potential mental health issues. This section highlights the need for a standardized protocol when dealing with disciplinary cases involving students, regardless of their mental health concerns. The students and service providers, such as the SDFO, must work together to implement this protocol. This is a preventive approach rather than an intervention where we provide a basic mental health service upon filing

the case/complaint.

Sixteen individuals were surveyed regarding their experience serving as discipline formators for various lengths. Of the participants, five reported having worked in the discipline office for an average of 15 to 20 years, while four indicated having been there for less than five years. The individuals surveyed conveyed that their primary responsibility entails upholding the policies and regulations of the institution to ensure a secure and orderly environment at the University.

Table 1. Profiling of Participants Based on Number of Years in the Office

Number of Years	N
0 months to 5 years	4
5.1 years to 10 years	0
10.1 years to 15 years	3
15.1 years to 20 years	5
20.1 years to 25 years	1
25.1 years to 30 years	1
30.1 years to 35 years	2
<b>Total N</b>	<b>16</b>

The Investigating Discipline Officers (IDOs) mentioned that apart from their core responsibilities, they also have secondary functions. These include correctly documenting complaints, referring some instances to section heads or coordinators, and coordinating with other relevant offices involved in the case. Effective collaboration is essential for their duties. Efficient and effective monitoring of both on and off-campus school activities (Discipline Enforcement Section 'DES') and the proper handling and maintenance of lost and found items (Lost and Found and Clearance Section 'LFCS') are crucial for the smooth functioning of daily operations. Adherence to the office's established case investigation protocols is essential in achieving these goals.

### Challenges encountered in handling students with discipline cases

Seven of the disciplinary officers/formators have expressed that they frequently encounter challenges when dealing with rude behavior from the complainant or participant. These instances may include cursing "*nagmumura*," harassment "*nag-ha-harass*," ignoring apprehension "*di pinapansin yun apprehension*," being disrespectful, walking away when dissatisfied "*walk away pag di nagustuhan*," and being impolite "*bastos*."

In addition, another IDO mentioned that they might have to navigate external factors such as the "*padrino*" system [F4], managing a growing number of students and parents with varying opinions about the alleged case, and receiving varying levels of support for implementing student handbook policies. Senior authorities may exert pressure when making decisions [F1]. When dealing with students experiencing mental health challenges, discipline officers aim to accurately evaluate their behavioral expressions, including anxiety, withdrawal, emotional outbursts, and tangential speech. Four of the IDOs have concurred on this. The officers know they may face challenges using their skills and experience to handle students effectively. As expressed, "*may something*" [F2] reflects the possibility that students may have mental health concerns.

They need to have a plan to address mental health concerns when a student is identified as having such issues. Their approach seems to be guided by their intuition (*having the right gut feel*) [F2, F3, F4] about the student's behavior, such as showing signs of anxiety, withdrawal, being overly emotional, and sometimes

jumping off-topic (which may seem out of context). They must also determine the best way to manage the case once a student has been identified as having a mental health issue.

Managing student complaints involves more than just the students themselves. Five participants identified this as a challenge because parents and professors may also be affected, which can complicate matters. This may require accommodations for them, further adding to the situation's complexity. One female senior Investigating Discipline Officer (IDO) expressed that providing student accommodations to parents can be time-consuming (*nagpo-provide ng accommodations to students even to their parents*, F1), even beyond regular working hours. This is just one of the challenges faced by the office's IDOs.

Per the study on health equity, it has been observed that the issues highlighted in the challenges mentioned above are of crucial importance. The study concludes that perceived school connectedness is vital in protecting students from engaging in at-risk behaviors [10]. Therefore, it is imperative to strengthen this protective factor to ensure that students do not become vulnerable to such behaviors.

### **Case Management of students with possible mental health concerns**

The IDOs want to learn first aid, mental health skills, empathy, and patience. During the FGD, approximately 3-5 participants emphasized the importance of organizing simulation workshops and seminars to teach proper techniques for managing students with mental health issues. They viewed this as a crucial aspect of acquiring these skills. It has been recognized that a dependable referral system for mental health professionals and experts can significantly aid students and IDOs in carrying out their duties more efficiently. Although there is a current practice of working closely with the Office of Counseling and Career Services (OCCS), there are still some deficiencies, such as the lack of a feedback loop system after referrals have been made.

Moreover, referrals can only be made in significant cases when the IDO strongly feels that a student may require the OCCS process. It needs to be determined whether OCCS will handle disciplinary issues for students during the initial assessment. This important matter must be clarified and included in the initial evaluation and processing.

When faced with students experiencing mental health concerns, the Investigating Discipline Officers (IDOs) take a comprehensive approach to evaluate each situation individually. This involves determining any potential triggers or warning signs that may be contributing factors. The IDOs can better understand each student's unique needs and challenges by carefully examining these factors. This approach helps ensure that appropriate support and resources are provided to promote overall well-being and academic success. Most of them expressed that it has been through observable behavioral manifestations such as crying behavior, "*natutulala*" [M1, F2], verbal response from the student, and other pertinent details that may help assist them through the help of checking via the Alpha and for some cases (students with major offenses) can collaborate through OCCS of possible mental health diagnosis.

In this light, the IDOs build a good rapport at the start of the case investigation (e.g., filing the complaint). A calm, open, and nonjudgmental approach (e.g., responding to the student's immediate needs) is usually considered. Another notable thing that the IDOs have placed in their practice is that they seek referral and help from their colleague or senior ID ("referral to a senior DO for a motherly approach," F2, F3) to help them with case management in cases the situation seems to be out of control (e.g., aggression). This serves as a good practice wherein a proper endorsement and case referral in the case management supersedes all else, specifically when there is an abrupt need for attention that may not be the expertise of the IDO, such as handling students with mental health issues.

It is crucial to handle discipline cases for students fairly and justly, regardless of the gravity of the offense

committed. To avoid stressors during case investigations, use the right approach. Interpersonal skills are crucial when dealing with these cases, such as “asking the right questions at the right time, similar to counseling” [M2] and showing sympathy to students (*pagpapakita ng simpatya sa mga estudyante*) [M3]. The IDOs have acknowledged that their innate skills are sources of strength, as revealed in the FGD. These skills are mostly centered on personal values and beliefs, such as self-control, patience, love, genuine concern for others, and empathy. One of the IDOs has expressed that sometimes they must rely on their strategy (*sariling diskarte*) [M2] to address the issue.

The officers responsible for enforcing discipline stated that their ability to investigate and manage cases is aided by a thorough knowledge of the policies outlined in the student handbook [F1, M3], adherence to the procedures outlined in the SDFO Manual of Operations, and an understanding of the nature of the violation. They emphasized the importance of being open-minded, empathetic, and committed to ongoing education through reading and seeking professional guidance. These qualities motivate them and help them carry out their responsibilities as discipline officers and student mentors.

During discussions on improving the handling of students with disciplinary cases and mental health concerns, it was suggested that better monitoring of case referrals to OCCS would be beneficial. Additionally, training IDOs to assess these students more effectively could assist in case referrals. The recent mental health lectures also mentioned this topic. However, they believe that additional learning sessions, simulation workshops, and improved techniques for managing mental health processes would benefit their investigation.

Managing cases involving students with mental health issues is essential to school reforms and capacity building, as highlighted in the Gregory and Fergus study on implementing a Social Emotional Learning framework [2]. It is crucial for those responsible for handling disciplinary cases to prioritize Positive Youth Development and promoting emotional literacy, which can bring about positive change for both the recipients and stakeholders involved.

To reduce negative behaviors and safety concerns, it's crucial to investigate and promote positive attitudes toward the school environment [11]. “When schools fulfill their students’ basic needs, they are more likely to be dedicated to their objectives and beliefs.” [12]. Hoover emphasized the significance of identifying inclusive practices for promoting socio-emotional learning as a disciplinary reform strategy. Exclusionary disciplinary procedures do not engage students and fail to improve their quality of life and educational experiences. This highlights the importance of embracing more inclusive practices [4].

Accordingly, proper planning, development, and execution of service-learning activities, which may also involve Student Affairs services like aiding character and discipline development, can promote positive youth development. This can result in better social and emotional skills for young individuals. The above findings support this claim [7]. Furthermore, when a school fosters a caring community prioritizing physical and psychological safety, students feel a greater sense of connection, belonging, and autonomy [12].

## CONCLUSIONS & RECOMMENDATIONS

The above results have consistently highlighted the need for continuous capacity-building workshops, training, and seminars to equip SDFO Discipline formators with the appropriate practical intervention skills and techniques. It is suggested that a strong partnership be forged with the Office of Counseling and Career Services (OCCS) and the Mental Health Center under the Psychology Department to provide adequate support for students with mental health needs. To facilitate this partnership, it is recommended that expectations be clearly defined for each office and a Memorandum of Agreement (MOA) be drafted to outline their respective roles and tasks.

A transparent referral system should be established from the point of investigation to the dismissal of the case. It is highly recommended to have a feedback loop system among other mental health offices. This may involve reviewing and revising the referral system form and creating new documents, such as a feedback form and corresponding protocols for those accessing these forms.

Here is a suggested protocol for dealing with disciplinary cases involving students, regardless of the severity of the offense (minor or major):

1. The alleged student is invited to report to the Discipline Enforcement Section (DES) upon the apprehension. The invitation may be made personally and via email (as a reminder) to ensure that the students are well-informed and advised of the nature of the invitation.
2. The apprehending IDO ensures that upon contact with the student in the apprehension stage, the SDFO Manual of Operation standard and protocol has been observed wherein the students' rights and the apprehending IDO welfare and protection have been taken care of in the presence of another IDO (as a witness).
3. Once the alleged student is reported in the DES, the attending IDO welcomes the students calmly, openly, and nonjudgmentally. Before investigating the case or discussing the nature of the apprehension, the alleged student should be asked for any needs (including but not limited to mental health concerns, e.g., medicines, HSO, OCCS). Suppose the student denies any need for mental health concerns, but the attending IDO sees signs of agitation, anxiousness, and possible mental health-related problems. In that case, it is essential to note and duly document these behavioral observations. At the same time, there is an ongoing case discussion and discussion afterward to case conference in the presence of an OCCS representative for proper consultation and referral (if needed).
4. If, at any point during the case investigation/discussion, the student manifested that they can no longer continue during any signs of mental health concerns, the IDO must put that into writing and make the proper endorsement and referral to an OCCS representative. Scheduling for the next case should only happen after getting clearance from the OCCS or when an OCCS representative is present, whichever is appropriate. It is essential always to consider the privacy and confidentiality of the matter, whether it involves mental health concerns or not.
5. The referral system to the OCCS must be appropriately endorsed with the full name of IDO, student name and ID number, date, time, and nature of alleged case investigation and duly signed by the OCCS counterpart with proper feedback and remarks in the recommendation part on how the case may or may not still proceed given the counselors' endorsement.
6. When using the referral and feedback loop system between the SDFO and OCCS, it is crucial to maintain strict confidentiality to protect the student's well-being. Only the representing IDO and OCCS representative and their respective leaders should be aware of any mental health concerns. This is by the law, and no other provisions should be considered.
7. The attending IDO will ensure proper documentation of mental health concerns and closely coordinate with OCCS and the Mental Health Center to monitor and evaluate students' mental health.
8. Further investigation and discussion are needed to determine whether a separate AdHoc board should be established to handle disciplinary cases of students with mental health concerns.

Based on the findings of the FGD, it is highly recommended that service providers such as IDOs continue to develop their skills. To this end, several workshops and skill-building opportunities may benefit IDOs personally and professionally. These include attending skills, interviewing skills, mental health first aid, seminar or simulation workshops focusing on supporting students with mental health issues, mentoring, and mental health wellbeing for IDO carers.

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