

FROM STUDENT MISCONDUCT TO FAMILY CRISIS: PARENTS' LIVED EXPERIENCES OF ZERO-TOLERANCE SCHOOL DISCIPLINE IN NAIROBI'S INFORMAL SETTLEMENTS

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ABSTRACT

This article presents the first phenomenological study in Kenya to centre parents' voices in examining the impact of zero-tolerance school discipline. Using in-depth interviews with 20 parents of students attending public elementary and secondary schools in Kibera, Nairobi, the study documents emotional distress, financial strain, and exclusion from disciplinary decision-making. Findings indicate that low-income and single caregivers bear disproportionate burdens through lost income, transport costs, and reinstatement demands. Parents expressed a strong preference for restorative, dialogue-based approaches aligned with Sustainable Development Goal 4. The study highlights the need for school discipline systems that do not exclude learners or parents, but instead reflect the lived realities of families in marginalised urban communities.

KEYWORDS

Zero-tolerance disciplinary policies, Parental experiences, Phenomenological study; Educational inequality, Restorative disciplinary approaches.

VIGNETTE

This study begins with a vignette drawn from Participant 16, a brief narrative that captures the lived reality of parents affected by school discipline policies. On a typical morning in Kibera, a single mother of three rises early to prepare her school-going children and then sets out in search of casual labour. Some days she returns home empty-handed, her children facing the night without supper. Having never attended school herself, she places her hopes on the one child still enrolled, believing that education is the family's path to a better future. Sadly, her husband abandoned her and the children, leaving her with no choice but to take care of them alone. As she prepares to head out for the day, she receives a distress call from the head of the school to rush to school. She sought to learn what had unfolded, but her efforts were futile; her presence was the only solution.

She had to abandon her day's work and rushed to school. Upon arrival, she was shocked to find her daughter waiting at the head teacher's office, with her belongings already packed and ready to leave the school compound. When she inquired why her daughter was outside with her belongings, she was informed that her daughter had violated school rules that warranted expulsion. No explanation followed. Devastated, she spent the day pleading for forgiveness, torn between the need to earn a wage and the desperate effort to keep her child in school. After hours of appeals, the punishment was reduced from expulsion to suspension, but the ordeal left a lasting scar. Memories of her older daughter dropping out of school resurfaced, fueling self-blame and despair. With no partner to share the burden and a school unwilling to empathize with her circumstances, she felt

utterly alone. By evening, the family faced not only the threat of exclusion from education but also the certainty of another night without food.

This vignette illustrates how parents in Nairobi's informal settlements navigate the emotional, financial, and social challenges imposed by exclusionary school discipline.

1. INTRODUCTION

Parents are identified as the primary caregivers, as they play a key role in their children's upbringing and development, thereby shaping their social, emotional, and educational growth [37;32]. The term "parent" encompasses not only the biological and legal relationship with children but also the actions, decisions, and contributions that shape a child's growth, well-being, and learning outcomes. Parents have a significant influence on academic performance, socialisation, and emotional health, thereby laying the foundation for lifelong development [5;32]. While it is widely acknowledged that parental involvement positively impacts children's educational attainment, the specific ways in which parents engage with schools and how socio-economic constraints affect this involvement remain underexplored, particularly among marginalised and low-income families [32;42]. Schools that foster collaborative partnerships with parents can encourage a culture of shared responsibility, improving both student outcomes and family engagement. In urban informal settlements, parental roles are further complicated by economic precarity, overcrowding, limited access to services, and informal labour markets [39]. Many caregivers, including single mothers, widows, widowers, and parents engaged in casual or part-time work, face significant challenges in providing for basic needs such as shelter, food, and educational materials. These constraints can limit their capacity to monitor and support their children, particularly when schools enforce rigid disciplinary measures.

Recent research demonstrates that zero-tolerance policies often amplify burdens on parents, teachers, and students by imposing non-negotiable punishments for infractions such as bullying, fighting, uniform violations, truancy, or non-payment of fees [28;50]. Although designed to maintain school order, these policies frequently fail to reduce misconduct and disproportionately affect marginalised students, imposing financial, emotional, and social strain on families. This study examines the lived experiences of parents navigating zero-tolerance policies in Nairobi's informal settlements. It explores how caregivers perceive, respond to, and cope with these disciplinary measures, highlighting their emotional, financial, and social consequences while identifying strategies of resilience. By foregrounding parental perspectives, the study contributes to ongoing discussions on restorative and inclusive school discipline. The study supports ongoing policy initiatives that seek to strengthen safe and equitable school environments, consistent with Sustainable Development Goal 4.

2. PROBLEM STATEMENT

Globally, zero-tolerance policies were adopted to maintain order and reduce student misconduct, influencing countries such as Kenya to adopt similar approaches. However, research by [3;19] and [22;29] shows that zero-tolerance policies are largely ineffective, disproportionately affect marginalised students, and contribute to school dropout and long-term social inequities. The Basic Education Act (2013) reshaped school governance in Kenya by formalising structures for compulsory education and encouraging stakeholder involvement in school decision-making. However, implementation of these provisions remains inconsistent across institutions. While designed to enforce discipline, these policies often impose heavy economic, emotional, and social burdens on families, particularly in Nairobi's informal settlements, where poverty and limited legal recourse exacerbate challenges. Despite these impacts, parents' experiences remain underexplored,

with most studies focusing on teachers or students. Without understanding how caregivers navigate exclusionary discipline, policymakers risk designing frameworks that overlook the realities faced by the families most affected.

3. PURPOSE OF THE STUDY

This study examines how parents in Nairobi's informal settlements experience, respond to, resist, and adapt to zero-tolerance disciplinary practices in public schools. By centring caregivers' lived experiences, it seeks to illuminate the emotional, financial, and relational strains these punitive policies create and to highlight the resilience strategies families employ to cope with these challenges. Participants represented diverse caregiving contexts, with monthly incomes ranging from Ksh 3,000 to Ksh 100,000 (median \approx Ksh 15,000). These findings highlight the importance of shifting toward restorative and inclusive disciplinary practices to improve safety and equity in learning environments within the framework of Sustainable Development Goal 4.

4. RESEARCH QUESTIONS

1. How do parents describe the emotional, financial, and social strains of zero-tolerance discipline on their families?
2. What coping strategies do parents employ to manage the effects of these disciplinary measures?

5. SIGNIFICANCE OF THE STUDY

This research has policy relevance for Kenya's Ministry of Education, offering insights to inform more equitable, inclusive, and effective disciplinary frameworks aligned with Sustainable Development Goal 4 (SDG 4), which aims to promote inclusive and quality education for all. Additionally, the study contributes to global debates on restorative justice by providing a parental perspective from the Global South, offering a nuanced description of how structural disadvantage intersects with school discipline.

6. LITERATURE REVIEW

Building on the historical and policy context outlined in the introduction, this literature review examines empirical studies on zero-tolerance school discipline, its impact on students and families, and alternative approaches such as restorative justice. Particular attention is given to the limited research on parental perspectives, especially in Kenya. The review is organized thematically, beginning with global evidence on zero-tolerance policies and their effectiveness, followed by discussions on unintended consequences, restorative alternatives, the Kenyan and Global South contexts, relevant theoretical frameworks, and concluding with the identification of research gaps.

6.1. Global Evidence on Zero-Tolerance Policies

Zero-tolerance policies in U.S. schools, which gained prominence during the 1980s in response to concerns about widespread student misconduct, are widely regarded as influenced by earlier applications of the concept of "zero tolerance." Notably, the Broken Windows theory posited that strict and consistent punishment could deter disorder [28;21]. The U.S. Navy also employed a zero-tolerance framework during the war on drugs, a model that was subsequently adapted within educational settings. Over time, this approach became institutionalized in public schools. It was codified into law in several states, including Florida, where mandatory sanctions were imposed for a wide range of infractions, including relatively minor forms of misconduct [3] and [28]. The 1994

Gun-Free Schools Act mandated suspension or expulsion for students bringing weapons to school, and the 1999 Columbine shooting further accelerated nationwide adoption. Despite popularity, evidence suggests these policies fail to improve safety or reduce misconduct [17;21;19]. They disproportionately affect students of color, low-income families, and those with disabilities, and are linked to higher dropout rates and the school-to-prison pipeline [28;3]. [17] The study aligns with [10], which finds that zero-tolerance policies promote inequity by penalizing students for infractions often beyond their control. Thus, in response, many U.S. districts are shifting toward restorative and preventive approaches emphasizing relationship-building and conflict resolution over exclusion [28;18]. Studies show that the zero-tolerance policy in U.S. schools has had severe unintended consequences for students, parents, and institutions [17]. These school policies have been associated with increased suspensions and heightened insecurity among teachers and students, even though schools aim to maintain order [21]. This has also led to a school-to-prison pipeline by making students' behaviour more criminalised, thus leading to more referrals to juvenile courts and police presence [5]. This method is criticised for overlooking developmental research indicating that misbehaviour and risk-taking are expected among adolescents [19]. In addition, frequent suspensions and expulsions increase the likelihood of long-term disengagement, dropout, and underachievement [13;45]. These harms are exceptionally high in marginalized populations, and racial and ethnic minority students are disproportionately targeted, which only contributes to existing inequalities [21]. In addition to academic losses, students tend to live emotionally troubled, stigmatized, and fractured relationships with their teachers and classmates, and have enduring psychosocial consequences [21;29]. Taken together, these results suggest that zero-tolerance approaches have not produced safer schools but have led to negative educational, social, and psychological consequences, underscoring the need to consider alternative, more balanced and supportive approaches.

6.2. Kenyan and Global South Perspective

The colonial legacy continues to shape disciplinary practices across the Global South. In South Africa, despite government bans, many schools continued to rely on corporal punishment, while suspension and expulsion often replaced restorative measures, disproportionately affecting low-income and minority students [27;22;35;34]. Uganda shows similar patterns, where cultural beliefs, teachers' personal experiences, family socialization, and structural inadequacies in teacher training perpetuate corporal punishment and exclusionary practices, violating children's rights and contributing to psychological trauma, fear, school dropout, and risky behaviors [28;23;1]. In West Africa, Ghana and Nigeria relied heavily on corporal punishment, later shifting to suspension and expulsion after legal bans, yet these measures generated adverse consequences, including school dropout and disengagement [2;37;18]. Kenya mirrors these broader trends. Colonial disciplinary legacies, structural poverty, and the slow adoption of restorative approaches have entrenched exclusionary practices, underscoring the need for parental voices in culturally relevant reforms. Although the Children Act of 2001 outlawed corporal punishment, punitive measures such as covert physical punishment, suspension, expulsion, and costly readmissions remain embedded in the education system [36;49;50]. These zero-tolerance approaches disproportionately affect low-income and marginalized students, reinforcing cycles of inequality and fear, and complicating the implementation of rights-based reforms and restorative practices [47;48;43]. These historical and structural patterns set the stage for understanding how parents in Nairobi's informal settlements experience and navigate zero-tolerance disciplinary policies, which this study examines.

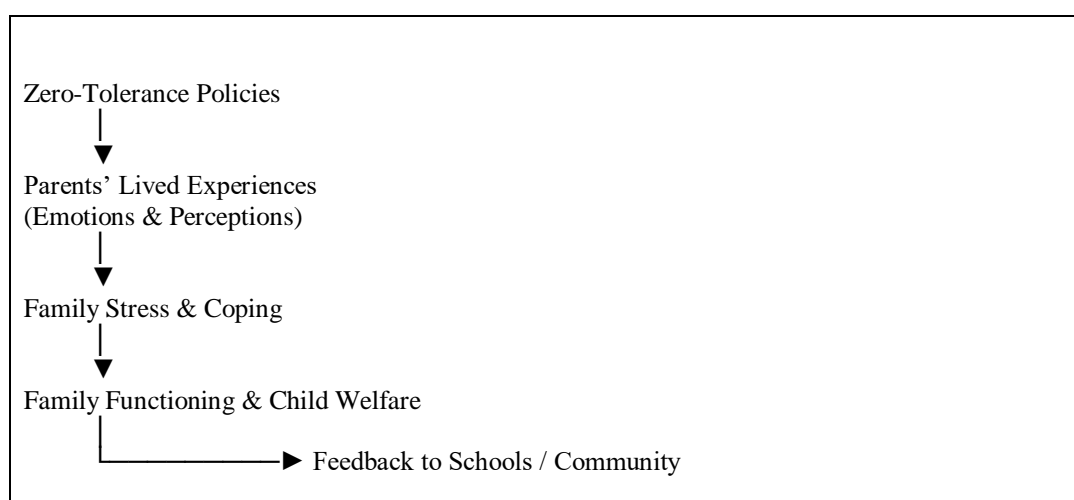
6.3. Theoretical Frameworks and Conceptual Lens

Ecological Systems Theory and Family Stress Theory are used as complementary lenses to examine how structural conditions, institutional practices, and family-level stressors intersect to shape parents' experiences of exclusionary school discipline. Ecological Systems Theory situates

parents within interconnected social, economic, and institutional environments, highlighting how family, school, and community contexts shape their interactions with school discipline. Family Stress Theory complements this perspective by examining how economic precarity and repeated disciplinary encounters generate financial, emotional, and relational strain, as well as the coping strategies families employ. Together, these frameworks extend the analysis beyond individual narratives, revealing how broader structural and relational factors shape parents' responses to punitive school practices.

6.4. Conceptual Framework Model

Figure 6.1 Conceptual Framework Illustrating the Theoretical Lenses Guiding the Study



This study is grounded in Husserlian phenomenology as a primary framework, which holds that knowledge of the social world begins with the careful description of lived experience. Husserl's philosophy posits that consciousness is always directed toward something (*intentionality*) and that the essence of a phenomenon can be revealed by attending to how it appears in the life world of those who experience it [26]. Applied to this study, the framework provides a conceptual lens for understanding how parents construct meaning around zero-tolerance disciplinary measures. Most importantly, Husserlian phenomenology enhances understanding of the findings from the 20 participants, emphasizing their subjective realities and the fundamental structures of their encounters with school discipline in Kibera, Africa's second-largest slum. This theoretical framework reveals the emotional, social, and practical dimensions of parental experience, providing a basis for critiquing punitive education policies as detailed in the study.

6.4.1. Ecological Systems Theory

Grounded in Bronfenbrenner's (1979) Ecological Systems Theory, this study examines how interactions across family, school, and wider socio-environmental systems shape parents' lived experiences of zero-tolerance disciplinary practices [12]. For instance, parents in Nairobi's informal settlements operate within an overlapping environment comprising their families, their children's schools, the communities in which they live, and broader policy and economic structures [6]. Microsystem level: Day-to-day interactions with children and other school personnel directly affect caregivers' responses to disciplinary measures. The mesosystem refers to the relationships among home, school, and local support systems that may moderate or intensify stress. The exosystem includes institutions such as the Ministry of Education and local governance bodies that shape school rules and the availability of resources, even when parents have little direct control.

Finally, the macrosystem encompasses cultural norms, historical colonial legacies, and economic inequalities that sustain punitive disciplinary practices. Situating parents within these interdependent systems illuminates how broader structural forces, such as poverty, education policy, and social stigma, intersect with family life to produce the emotional, financial, and relational strains documented in this study.

6.4.2. Family Stress Theory

According to Boss [9], family stress theory, developed by McCubbin and Patterson [39], posits that families respond differently to stressors based on their perceptions and adaptations to events such as economic crises, illness, and natural disasters. In this study, Family Stress Theory can be used to understand the interaction among economic strain, family disruption, and school-related stressors, and to examine how parents cope and how family functioning is affected. These pressures are compounded by zero-tolerance disciplinary policies that impose emotional suffering and financial burdens, as well as the risk of school transfer or exclusion, as observed in Nairobi's informal settlements. This framework helps reveal how parents appraise stressors, mobilize internal strengths, and seek social support to protect their children's education and maintain family stability [16]. It also underscores how persistent poverty limits available resources, making adaptation more complex and fragile. It also highlights the persistent impact of poverty, which restricts resources and makes adaptation even more complex and fragile. By pointing to such dynamics, the theory elucidates the compounding effect of punitive policies on families already facing significant socioeconomic limitations.

6.5. Integration of Frameworks

This study applies both Ecological Systems Theory and Family Stress Theory, within a descriptive phenomenological approach, providing a comprehensive lens for understanding parents' lived experiences with zero-tolerance disciplinary policies. The Ecological Systems Theory situates these experiences within the context of interactions among social, economic, and institutional systems. In contrast, Family Stress Theory describes the effects of financial hardship and school-related stress on coping and family functioning. Through a descriptive phenomenological approach, the paper situates the subjective experiences of parents, including the structural variables and adaptive mechanisms that shape how families living in Nairobi's informal settlements negotiate punitive schooling.

6.6. Gap Statement and Conclusion

Although research on school discipline is growing, parents' experiences, especially in Nairobi's informal settlements, remain largely overlooked. Most studies focus on students or teachers, leaving gaps in understanding how caregivers perceive, respond to, and cope with zero-tolerance policies despite evidence that family involvement strongly influences educational outcomes [39;19;22;40;11]. Few analyses consider how parents' socio-economic status and cultural capital shape advocacy within school bureaucracies [45;33] or how suspensions, expulsions, and costly reinstatement fees impose financial and emotional burdens in contexts of poverty [41;50]. While Family Stress Theory highlights coping in high-stress settings, it is rarely applied to Kenyan parents facing punitive discipline [17]. Colonial legacies also persist in authoritarian school structures [44;49;21], yet their intersection with contemporary parental experiences is scarcely examined. Moreover, although restorative justice is promoted as an alternative [16;4], the role of parents in such processes in the Global South remains underexplored. This study addresses these gaps by centering parents' voices and applying phenomenological, cultural-capital, family-stress, and postcolonial frameworks to illuminate the lived strains and resilience strategies shaped by zero-tolerance discipline in Nairobi's informal settlements.

7. METHODOLOGY

7.1. Data and Methods

This study used qualitative data collected from parents and caregivers residing in Kibera, Nairobi's largest informal settlement. The research was designed to explore parents' lived experiences and perceptions of zero-tolerance disciplinary policies in public elementary and secondary schools. Data were collected in April 2025 through in-depth, one-on-one semi-structured interviews. Interviews were conducted in English or Kiswahili based on participants' preferences. The fieldwork targeted parents and caregivers of students currently enrolled in public secondary schools and in elementary schools that implement zero-tolerance discipline. Kibera was selected due to its high population density, precarious employment patterns, and limited educational resources, all of which exacerbate the social and economic consequences of exclusionary school discipline. A total of twenty (20) parents and caregivers participated in the study. Participants were purposively selected to capture a range of socio-demographic characteristics, including gender, age, marital status, education, occupation, and household size. Community contacts and parent groups within local schools assisted with recruitment, ensuring that participants had direct experience with school disciplinary actions, such as suspensions, expulsions, fines, or mandatory transfers.

The data collection process included:

- In-depth interviews (n = 20): The interviews, each lasting 45–60 minutes, explored parents' awareness of zero-tolerance disciplinary policies alongside their lived experiences of implementation, including emotional and financial consequences, school communication practices, and views on alternative disciplinary approaches.
- Field notes: Observations of the interview context, non-verbal cues, and reflections on participant emotions were recorded to provide additional interpretive depth. With participants' informed consent, all interviews and discussions were audio-recorded and subsequently transcribed verbatim to support systematic analysis.

7.2. Variable Descriptions

Because this was a qualitative phenomenological inquiry, the “variables” of interest were themes and experiential dimensions rather than numerical measures. However, the participants' socio-demographic characteristics were documented to contextualize the findings.

- Dependent focus: Parents' *lived experiences* and *perceptions* of zero-tolerance disciplinary policies, including emotional, financial, and relational impacts.
- Key descriptive characteristics: Gender, age, marital status, education level, household size, employment status, and monthly income. These characteristics enabled the description of experiential differences across socioeconomic positions.

To enhance descriptive validity, socio-demographic data are summarised in Appendix A (Table 1), and the complete participant-level demographics are presented in Appendix B.

7.3. Analytical Approach

Interview transcripts were analyzed using phenomenological thematic analysis, supported by NVivo software. Analysis followed the seven steps of Colaizzi's (1978) descriptive phenomenological method, adapted for this study:

1. Familiarization: The analysis began with a process of repeated, detailed engagement with the transcripts, enabling the researcher to develop a comprehensive understanding of the data and its contextual nuances.
2. Significant statements: Extracting key statements that directly related to parents' experiences of zero-tolerance discipline.
3. Formulated meanings: Deriving meanings from each significant statement.
4. Theme clustering: Organizing meanings into thematic clusters representing essential aspects of the phenomenon.
5. Exhaustive description: Developing a comprehensive description of the parents' lived experiences.
6. Essence identification: Distilling the fundamental structure of the phenomenon.
7. Member checking: Returning key findings to selected participants for validation of accuracy and resonance.

7.4. NVIVO operations and analytic transparency.

The transcripts were imported into NVivo and were first coded inductively. Major statements were assigned descriptive codes, which were then sequentially grouped into overarching themes. Early coding rounds were supported by the development of a formal codebook (node descriptions and inclusion/exclusion rules), which was further refined through peer debriefing. A second coder (a research assistant) reviewed the coding and discussed any discrepancies to enhance analytical credibility. The memos were written throughout to document analytic reflections and connect codes with theoretical constructs (Family Stress Theory and Ecological Systems Theory). Patterns based on socio-demographic groups were investigated using matrix coding queries and word-frequency checks. To increase transparency and reproducibility, a comprehensive evidence table of the codes, themes, and representative quotations is presented in Appendix X, and the hierarchical NVivo coding model (coding tree) is provided in Appendix Y. The analytical decisions are documented in these appendices, thereby supporting the transferability of the findings. To ensure credibility and trustworthiness, the researcher maintained a reflexive journal, participated in peer debriefing, and employed member checks to verify the significance of themes. Bracketing was engaged in a deliberate attempt to set aside the researcher's prior beliefs, informed by their professional experience and role as an educator within the same community.

7.5. Researcher Positionality

As the author of this study, I occupy a dual positionality as both an *insider* and an *outsider* to the educational contexts examined. My background as an educator and school administrator in Nairobi's informal settlements, combined with my upbringing and education in Kenya, positions me as an insider to the context under study. This perspective shapes my interpretation of the social and institutional factors influencing parents' and students' experiences. My prior role placed me at the centre of implementing zero-tolerance disciplinary policies, providing firsthand insight into how they operate within resource-constrained schools and their unintended effects on families. At the same time, my academic training and residence in the United States position me as a partial outsider, allowing me to engage with the research context from a greater critical distance and with greater analytical reflection. Engaging in phenomenological inquiry required a conscious process of bracketing my prior assumptions and maintaining reflexivity through analytic memos and journals. I acknowledge that my professional background and social location shape my interpretations; however, they also provide valuable insights into the interconnected relationships among policy, equity, and lived experiences in this context. Ultimately, my positionality as a Kenyan educator and researcher, deeply familiar with local realities yet informed by global academic perspectives, enabled me to approach this study with both empathy and critical reflection,

honoring participants' voices while interrogating the broader systems that structure their experiences.

8. FINDINGS AND DISCUSSIONS

8.1. Introduction

This chapter presents the lived experiences of parents navigating zero-tolerance disciplinary policies in Nairobi's informal settlements. Guided by Husserlian descriptive phenomenology and analysed through Colaizzi's method, the aim is to reveal the essence of these experiences through parents' own voices. Four major themes emerged from the analysis: Gendered Struggles: Invisible Care Burdens and Emotional Labour; Economic Stressors: Discipline as a Family Penalty; Power and Procedural Injustice; and Resilience and Restorative Preferences. Each theme is presented with rich narrative accounts from the one-on-one interviews, followed by neutral connections to Family Stress Theory and Ecological Systems Theory to situate the findings within broader social and environmental contexts. To provide context for the lived experiences described in the following themes, Table 1 summarises the key socio-demographic characteristics of the twenty parents who participated in the study. Presenting this information at the outset helps the reader appreciate the diversity of household structures, economic conditions, and caregiving roles represented in the narratives that follow.

Table 1. Socio-demographic Characteristics of Participants (N = 20)

Characteristics	Category	n
Gender	Female	10
	Male	10
Age	29-35	2
	36-42	9
	43-51	9
Marital status	Married	11
	Single parent	9
Educational level	No school	1
	Primary	9
	Secondary	5
	College	5
Monthly income	≤10,000	4
	10,000-14,000	4
	15,000-20,000	9
	30,000- 60,000	2
	100,000 +	1
Employment Status	Casual labour	1
	Part time	10
	Fulltime	2
	Self employed	7
Children per household	0-1	1
	2-3	8
	4-5	10
	6	1

Theme 1: Gendered Struggles – Invisible Care Burdens and Emotional Labour

Mothers bore the most significant burden in responding to disciplinary actions. They described reducing income-earning activities to respond to school calls, managing emotional strain, and shouldering blame for their children's behaviour. P19 (single father) described the emotional strain of parenting alone and feeling betrayed when his son was caught with bhang: "I was heartbroken... raising him as a single father is hard. I did not expect that behavior from him. It shook the trust I had in him." P20 spoke of internal conflict after his son was punished publicly: "I felt terrible. I was ashamed as a parent and started questioning where I went wrong... it hurt me deeply." Both fathers show that even when mothers are not present, caregiving carries intense emotional weight and self-blame, echoing the gendered expectations previously seen among mothers. P2 recalled: "I was at our rural home when this incident occurred, and upon hearing about it, I rushed back to Nairobi... The other parent threatened me and insisted I must pay for the torn shirt, even though my child had been injured." Another parent (P3) highlighted the double strain of discipline and hidden costs: "Travelling to school only to find out that he was suspended was not easy on me... I had to cover our transport costs back home again." P4 described how his wife was *deeply affected* by their son's expulsion, explaining that she cried when she heard the decision and that the stress "profoundly affected her." P5, a single mother, narrated how her son's two-week suspension forced her to "stay home with the child," adding financial pressure and creating fear in the child: "This situation made him fear me... he confessed to his brother he was filled with fear because I punish them physically when they misbehave." P14, a single mother in Kibera, explained that teachers "only call the mother," forcing her to leave casual jobs and lose income whenever her daughter was suspended. Her words, "I am everything to this child," show the emotional and economic weight of solo caregiving. P12, caring for five of her own children and three relatives, travelled six hours to plead for a child's reinstatement after expulsion. Her reflection, "Life in Nairobi is not easy, and I carry many responsibilities," illustrates the compounded stress of caregiving and kinship obligations. P16, a widow caring for a son with epilepsy and three other children, recounted travelling with a broken leg to collect her suspended daughter. She whispered, "I was deeply hurt... I wish they had just punished her and let her stay." Her testimony highlights the double burden of disability caregiving and sudden disciplinary demands. P9, abandoned by her husband, described how school calls forced her to abandon casual laundry jobs and endure evenings without dinner: "There were days when I did not even have dinner at home." These descriptions show how mothers are portrayed as ineffective disciplinarians, experiencing emotional stress and a heavy physical workload, in the absence of a father. Both accounts reinforce how schools treat mothers as default disciplinarians, echoing Family Stress Theory, where economic precarity magnifies maternal emotional labour. This pattern reflects Family Stress Theory, where caregiving responsibilities heighten stress under financial strain. From an Ecological Systems perspective, school practices in the exosystem support gendered expectations in the family microsystem, making mothers the default disciplinarians.

Theme 2: Economic Stressors – Discipline as a Family Penalty

Parents consistently described school discipline as a financial blow. Transport costs, lost income, and unexpected levies for "damage" or "readmission" compounded their daily struggles, forcing families to divert scarce resources from food and rent to disciplinary compliance. P3 recalled: "Each parent was fined Ksh 500 for each damaged item... The school never considered my income. I could not pay the fees for my younger child and even struggled to pay rent." P2 similarly lost business time and faced unplanned costs: "I had to buy a shirt, something I had not budgeted for. I lost business time going to school." P4 described the cost of relocating his son after expulsion: "I had to pay fees, buy uniforms, and everything required money. I ended up taking on debt to sustain my family." P5 emphasised lost income and wasted transport costs: "Each school trip cost me money I had not budgeted for... I had already paid school fees, but my child came back home." P19 lost a full day's income whenever the school summoned him: "I was called while at work and had to leave immediately. That disrupted my job and affected our finances." P20, a boda-boda

delivery rider, similarly noted: “The day I was called to school, I missed work... I could have made at least KSh 500, but it was not possible.” P14 described skipping casual laundry work to attend school, resulting in nights without meals: “There were days when I did not even have dinner at home.” P12 recounted multiple unplanned trips, transport for belongings, and looming school fees after her foster child’s expulsion: “These rules are a heavy burden on parents.” P16 faced unexpected transport costs, medical limitations, and the loss of two months’ income during her daughter’s suspension: “I had to rely on help from friends... those two months were a loss.” P9, dependent on daily casual labour, experienced the penalty of repeated summons: “When I had to go to school to speak with the teachers, there were days when I did not even have dinner at home.” P20, a father, summarised the cascading expenses of transport, accommodation, and lost income during his son’s suspension: “It overstretched my finances just to comply with the school’s decision.” These stories show how zero-tolerance punishments functioned like hidden taxes, forcing single mothers and low-income fathers to choose between work and compliance. Although schools did not impose direct cash penalties, they imposed sudden suspensions, which led to lost earnings and accumulating debts, thereby serving as an indirect economic tax on already vulnerable families. In Family Stress Theory, these unanticipated economic shocks escalate parental strain. At the same time, Ecological Systems Theory highlights how school policies in the mesosystem ripple through the household microsystem, compelling families to redirect scarce resources away from basic needs to disciplinary demands.

Theme 3: Power and Procedural Injustice

Many parents felt powerless when dealing with school authorities. They described meetings in which their voices were ignored, and disciplinary decisions appeared predetermined. P2 recalled: “We were invited to school after completing the suspension... they were caned before we were given further punishment.” P3 described the shock of arriving at school only to discover hidden fines and a mandate to clear all outstanding balances: “I was shocked to be told that he was not allowed in until we paid for the damage... The school made this decision independently.” P4 recounted: “I pleaded with them to consider my situation and not expel my child just because of lateness. However, they refused completely... I was only called to sign letters.” P5 similarly felt silenced: “When we returned to the school with my child, I tried to plead with the principal not to suspend him... but I was not given the chance.” P19 highlighted unequal treatment: “My son and another student made a mistake together, but my son was the only one punished... sometimes the background of the student affects how they are treated.” P20 observed similar bias: “I have seen children being expelled for not shaving or arriving late... but some children seemed favored, they were never punished even when they did wrong.” P14 said: “When the school called me, they decided to expel the child... I felt bad and immediately spoke to the teachers so the child could remain in school,” but her pleas were initially ignored. P12 faced shifting decisions: “The principal shocked me by saying there was no need for further discussion,” and I suspected discrimination when other offenders were forgiven. A father lamented favoritism: “Prefects are immune to punishment... my son fought back, but he was the only one suspended.” Both mothers and fathers repeatedly felt excluded from decision-making and powerless vis-à-vis school authorities. P16 was ordered to “pick up” her child without discussion, despite her injury: “I was not given a chance.” P9 described pleading with teachers to reduce expulsion to suspension: “I begged them until they forgave her.” These stories reveal opaque procedures in which parents are summoned only to ratify pre-made decisions, thereby deepening mistrust and humiliation. Rules were applied selectively, often shaped by class or social background, leaving parents feeling silenced and excluded from their children’s education. From an Ecological Systems perspective, the school functions as a dominant actor in the mesosystem, exerting power over family–institution interactions. Family Stress Theory helps explain how this imbalance compounds emotional distress, as parents struggle to protect their children while fearing retaliation if they challenge authority.

Theme 4: Resilience and Restorative Preferences

Despite hardship, parents demonstrated resourcefulness and a preference for supportive, rather than punitive, approaches. They sought dialogue, guidance, and opportunities for their children to learn from mistakes. P2 described drawing on spiritual and community support: “I went to church and also to the village elder... friends encouraged me.” P3 sought emergency help from friends to keep his son in school and called for non-punitive solutions: “There should be no harmful punishments such as beating, expulsion, or suspension... Parents should be fully involved.” P4 turned to “friends and neighbors... very supportive of me and my child,” who encouraged him not to let the stress “lead to depression.” P5 sought advice from her brother and highlighted the need for compassion and dialogue: “Teachers should know that we parents feel at peace when our children are in school... If a child makes a mistake, let them remain in school, serve their punishment, and continue learning.” Despite hardship, P19 valued respectful dialogue: “They involved me in the process and treated me with respect, which I appreciated, even though I felt powerless to change the outcome.” P20 advocated for supportive alternatives: “Counseling, conversations, peer support groups... teachers should listen to parents and children before making decisions.” P14 begged for mercy until the school reduced the expulsion to suspension, after which she noted that her daughter became “more interested in school” and that their relationship improved. P12 pursued community support by approaching a county MCA and a SHOFCA counselling group, and observed her foster child quietly returning to study at a community library. Another father planned to raise concerns at the next parents’ meeting and suggested “monthly mentorship and dialogue sessions” rather than punishment. P16 drew strength from prayer and neighbours’ support while caring for a disabled child: “I just stayed strong because I knew it would pass eventually.” P9 noted positive change after suspension: “After the punishment, she now has better discipline... our relationship improved.” Both mothers called for dialogue and fairness, with P9 urging schools to “stop rushing to send children home” and to “at least listen to the children.” These actions show parents’ strong preference for restorative approaches, community engagement, and dialogue over exclusion. Fathers and mothers alike stressed that parental involvement, counselling, and in-school corrective measures would better guide children than harsh suspensions. Their calls for counselling, parent–teacher collaboration, and mentorship echo the principles of restorative justice. These coping strategies illustrate the adaptive resources highlighted in Family Stress Theory and the protective influence of community networks within Ecological Systems Theory. Informal support groups, spiritual practices, and a shared commitment to restorative justice provided emotional relief and sustained hope, enabling families to maintain connection and optimism even amid disciplinary hardship.

8.2. Summary of Findings

The findings reveal that zero-tolerance policies in Nairobi’s informal settlements impose significant burdens on families and shape parental responses to school discipline. The essence of parents’ experiences was marked by emotional strain, fear, shame, and frustration when children were suspended or excluded. Mothers, particularly single caregivers, bore intensive and largely invisible care work, juggling school follow-ups with household duties. Families faced economic penalties, including fines, transport costs, and lost income from taking time off work, turning minor infractions into broader family crises. Parents consistently reported procedural injustices, unclear rules, inconsistent enforcement, and limited consultation, leaving them feeling powerless. Nevertheless, parents were resilient and relied on neighbours, church associations, and informal networks to support one another and to seek material and emotional assistance. In the narratives, restorative practices, dialogue, counselling, mentorship, and teacher-parent collaboration were significantly preferred to punitive approaches. These experiences attest to the necessity of school policies that protect children’s right to learn and support economically disadvantaged families.

9. CONCLUSION AND POLICY IMPLICATIONS

This study offers an in-depth examination of how parents in Nairobi's informal settlements experience and respond to zero-tolerance school discipline. Parents reported heavy emotional strain, stress, worry, and helplessness alongside financial penalties such as fines, lost income, and transport costs. The burden of care was heaviest on mothers, who, in most cases, missed work to attend school summons. Despite these trials, families resisted by bargaining with teachers, relying on community ties, and offering emotional support to their children. In all interviews, parents noted that they preferred dialogue and problem-solving to punitive action.

9.1. Restorative Practices as a Whole-School Model

While this study foregrounds parents' lived realities, the patterns that emerged carry critical implications for school policy. These findings echo global evidence that restorative justice, when embedded as a whole-school approach, reduces reliance on punishment while strengthening relationships [38;4;31;20;7]. Universal prevention activities, such as classroom circles, foster a sense of belonging, whereas targeted measures, such as peer mediation and restorative conferences, address harm and repair relationships [24;8;16]. Research shows that integrating these practices shifts discipline from punishment to accountability and healing [15;25]. Despite the formal ban on corporal punishment in Kenya, the uptake of restorative disciplinary approaches remains limited [30;46;50]. Parents' testimonies underscore the urgency of adopting relationship-centered approaches that advance Sustainable Development Goal 4 (SDG 4) on inclusive, equitable, and quality education.

9.2. Policy Directions

Key actions include:

- Replacing exclusionary discipline with restorative circles, counseling, and parent–teacher mediation;
- Ensuring transparent procedures and meaningful parental participation;
- Providing gender-responsive support for mothers who carry disproportionate care burdens; and
- Safeguarding against biased decision-making that marginalizes low-income families.

Future research should examine the long-term effects of zero-tolerance policies and compare restorative models across contexts. Together, these findings highlight the need for policies that protect children's right to learn while supporting caregivers rather than punishing them.

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APPENDIX A

Table 1. Socio-Demographic Characteristics of Participants (N = 20)

Characteristics	Category	n
Gender	Female	10
	Male	10
Age	29-35	2
	36-42	9
	43-51	9
Marital status	Married	11
	Single parent	4
	Widow/widower	4
	Divorced /separated	1
Educational level	No school	1
	Primary	9
	Secondary	5
	College	5
Monthly income	≤10,000	4
	10,000-14,000	4
	15,000-20,000	9
	30,000- 60,000	2
	100,000 +	1
Employment Status	Casual labour	1
	Part time	10
	Fulltime	2
	Self employed	7
Children per household	0-1	1
	2-3	8
	4-5	10
	6	1

APPENDIX B:**PARTICIPANT DEMOGRAPHICS**

Participant ID	Age	Gender	Education	Employment status	Type of work	Monthly income	Number of children	Household members	Parent status
P1	49	F	College	YES	Part time	15,000	5	7	Single parent
P2	51	F	Secondary	No	Part time	15,000-	4	4	Married

						20,000			
P3	46	M	Primary	Yes	Part time	10,000	3	4	Married
P4	38	F	Primary	Yes	Fulltime	10,000	2	3	Married
P5	37	M	Primary	Yes	Part time	20,000	3	5	Single parent
P6	43	M	College	Yes	Fulltime	40,000-60,000	4	6	Married
P7	42	F	Primary	Yes	Part time	10,000	4	6	Married
P8	42	F	Primary	Yes	Part time	6,500	4	4	Single parent
P9	47	F	College	No	Self employed	8,000	4	6	Single parent
P10	37	F	Primary	No	Self employed	3,000	3	7	Married
P11	39	M	Primary	No	Self employed	15,000	3	2	Single parent
P12	36	F	Secondary	Yes	Part time	20,000	5	10	Married
P13	44	M	Primary	Yes	Part time	10,000-15,000	4	6	Single parent
P14	46	M	College	Yes	Fulltime	100,000	4	6	Single parent
P15	35	M	College	Yes	Part time	15,000	3	5	Married
P16	38	F	No education	No	Self employed	12,000	3	3	Single parent
P17	43	M	Secondary	No	Self employed	30,000	3	5	Married
P18	39	F	Secondary	Yes	Part time	9,000	4	5	Single parent
P19	29	M	Secondary	No	Self employed	15,000	1	2	Single parent
P20	50	M	Primary	No	Self employed	18,000	6	8	Married