

Student Unrest in Kenyan Secondary Schools: Examining the Moral Obligations of Parents and Teachers

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Abstract: Student unrest remains a persistent challenge in Kenyan secondary schools, often resulting in disrupted learning, destruction of property, injuries, insecurity, and weakened relationships among learners, teachers, parents, and school administrators. Although unrest is frequently treated as a problem of student indiscipline, its recurrence points to broader moral, relational, and institutional weaknesses within both the home and school environments. This article examined the moral responsibilities of parents and teachers in preventing and addressing student unrest in secondary schools in Kenya. The study was guided by Nel Noddings' Ethics of Care Theory, which emphasises attentiveness, dialogue, moral modelling, responsiveness, and caring relationships in the development of responsible behaviour. A qualitative narrative literature review design was adopted. Data were drawn from peer-reviewed journal articles, government reports, education legislation, policy documents, and publications addressing student unrest, parental involvement, teacher–student relationships, discipline, guidance and counselling, and learner participation. The literature was analysed thematically. The findings revealed that parents and teachers have complementary moral responsibilities in moral modelling and character formation, early identification of learner distress, open communication, guidance and counselling, fair discipline, learner participation, and cooperation between the home and school. Parents are responsible for providing continuous moral guidance, supervision, emotional support, and consistent correction, while teachers are expected to exercise authority fairly, listen to learners, identify warning signs, and provide supportive and corrective interventions. The review further established that punishment alone cannot sustainably prevent unrest unless it is accompanied by dialogue, counselling, accountability, and attention to learners' legitimate welfare concerns. The article concludes that student unrest should not be attributed exclusively to either parents or teachers. Effective prevention requires shared responsibility, regular parent–teacher communication, trusted grievance-reporting mechanisms, strengthened counselling services, fair disciplinary procedures, and meaningful learner participation. Schools should therefore adopt preventive and restorative approaches that combine care, accountability, moral guidance, and institutional responsiveness.

Keywords: *Ethics of Care, Moral Responsibility, Parental Involvement, Secondary Schools, Student Discipline, Student Unrest, Teacher–Student Relationships, Kenya.*

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I. INTRODUCTION

Schools are expected to provide environments in which learners acquire knowledge, develop socially and emotionally, and learn how to relate responsibly with other members of society. However, violence and unrest continue to undermine the safety and educational purpose of schools in many parts of the world. School violence may involve physical fights, bullying, intimidation, destruction of property, psychological abuse, sexual violence, protests and other conduct that threatens learners, teachers and school

communities. UNESCO (2026) reports that approximately one in three learners' experiences bullying at school every month, while more than 36% of learners have been involved in physical fights with their peers. These experiences can weaken learners' sense of belonging, reduce their engagement in education, adversely affect academic performance and contribute to psychological distress. The persistence of school violence therefore raises important questions about the responsibilities of the adults entrusted with learners' care, protection and moral development.

Student unrest is a particular form of disruption in which learners collectively express dissatisfaction with school policies, administrative decisions, living conditions or unmet needs. It may take relatively peaceful forms, including boycotting classes, presenting grievances, staging demonstrations or walking out of school. In more serious cases, however, unrest may involve violent confrontation, vandalism, physical attacks, destruction of school property and arson. Student unrest should consequently be distinguished from isolated acts of individual indiscipline. Whereas individual misconduct may involve a learner violating a school rule, unrest frequently reflects collective discontent and may reveal deeper difficulties in school governance, communication, learner welfare and relationships between learners and adults. Treating all unrest merely as criminality or disobedience may therefore conceal the institutional, social and moral conditions that give rise to it (National Crime Research Centre [NCRC], 2017; Wasonga & Makahamadze, 2020).

In Kenya, student unrest in secondary schools is neither a new nor an occasional phenomenon. The NCRC (2017) traces recorded student protests to Maseno School in 1908. During the 1960s and 1970s, most incidents took the form of class boycotts, demonstrations and mass walkouts. From the 1980s onwards, however, some protests became increasingly violent and were associated with serious injuries, loss of life and destruction of school property. The country has experienced several tragic incidents, including the violence at St. Kizito Mixed Secondary School in 1991, the Bombolulu Girls Secondary School dormitory fire in 1997, the killing of prefects at Nyeri High School in 1999 and the Kyanguli Secondary School fire in 2001. The scale of the problem was again demonstrated in 2016, when more than 130 secondary schools experienced the burning of dormitories and other facilities within a period of approximately 15 weeks. These events demonstrate that student unrest is a recurring national concern rather than a problem confined to a few schools or regions (NCRC, 2017).

Research and official inquiries show that student unrest does not arise from a single cause. Earlier government investigations identified factors such as overloaded curricula, fear of examinations, inadequate recreational facilities, poor school amenities, strict rules, authoritarian administrative practices, weak guidance and counselling services, poor communication between learners and school administrators, peer pressure, teachers' lack of commitment, mismanagement of school resources and inadequate attention to student welfare. Factors outside the school, including poor parenting, substance abuse, economic hardship, exposure to violence, changing social values and negative peer or media influence, may also contribute to learner misconduct. The recurrence of unrest therefore reflects the interaction of personal, family, school and societal conditions. Assigning responsibility exclusively to learners, parents or teachers would oversimplify a problem produced by several interconnected influences (NCRC, 2017).

The organisation of school life is also important in understanding why learner dissatisfaction sometimes

develops into violent protest. Wasonga and Makahamadze (2020) found that unrest in Kenyan boarding schools may be associated with environments in which learners experience excessive control, limited participation, poor living conditions and inadequate opportunities to express their concerns. Their study argues that some boarding schools continue to operate through highly authoritarian structures, even though contemporary learners are increasingly aware of their rights and expect to be consulted on decisions affecting them. When school authorities do not provide credible channels for dialogue, negotiation and representation, learners may regard disruptive action as the only means through which their grievances can be heard. This perspective does not excuse violence or destruction of property. It instead emphasizes the need to examine the conditions under which legitimate dissatisfaction is ignored until it is expressed through destructive behaviour.

Teachers occupy a central position in preventing such situations because they interact with learners daily and influence both the academic and moral climate of the school. Their responsibility extends beyond delivering curriculum content. Teachers are expected to model respectful behaviour, communicate fairly, identify changes in learners' emotional and behavioural conditions, respond to grievances, offer guidance and use disciplinary approaches that preserve the dignity of the child. UNESCO (2022) identifies teachers as essential actors in creating psychologically and physically safe classrooms, modelling constructive conflict management, supporting student-led initiatives, responding to violence and maintaining links between schools and parents. Evidence from a meta-analysis covering 65 studies and 185,881 learners also showed that higher-quality teacher–student relationships were associated with lower levels of bullying perpetration and peer victimisation (ten Bokkel et al., 2023). These findings indicate that teachers' relationships with learners are not secondary to discipline; they form part of the conditions through which violence and unrest may either be prevented or intensified.

Teachers' moral obligations are therefore broader than enforcing school rules. As adults entrusted with authority over learners, teachers have an obligation to exercise that authority fairly, listen to learners, avoid humiliation and create conditions in which students can report concerns without fear. Discipline that relies primarily on intimidation, collective punishment or the suppression of student opinion may produce outward obedience without developing moral responsibility. By contrast, guidance, dialogue, restorative practices, consistent enforcement of rules and respectful teacher–student relationships can help learners understand the consequences of their conduct and accept responsibility for their actions. Teachers must therefore balance institutional order with care, justice, empathy and respect for learners' dignity.

Parents similarly have an important role in shaping learners' behaviour, attitudes and sense of responsibility. Their obligation does not end when children are admitted to boarding or day schools. Parents are expected to monitor their children's behaviour, communicate with teachers, provide

emotional guidance, reinforce appropriate values and participate in resolving disciplinary concerns. In a study conducted in public secondary schools in Turkana Central Sub-County, Njugia et al. (2024) found that parental involvement significantly influenced student discipline. However, the study also established that parents were not effectively involved in many disciplinary matters and recommended clearer communication and greater parental participation in school discipline meetings. This finding illustrates the dangers of parents becoming involved only when learners have already been suspended, expelled or implicated in unrest. Effective parental responsibility requires regular engagement rather than crisis-driven intervention.

Kenyan education law reinforces the shared nature of this responsibility. The Basic Education Act recognizes parents' right to participate in the character development of their children and requires every secondary school to establish a Parents Association. Among its functions, the association is expected to maintain constructive relationships between parents and teachers, assist school management in guiding, counselling and disciplining learners, and recommend measures for student and staff welfare. The Act also requires accountability, democratic decision-making, respect for children's opinions, stakeholder participation and the elimination of corporal punishment and degrading treatment. In addition, the Basic Education Regulations require school rules to be developed through public participation rather than imposed without consultation. These provisions indicate that discipline is intended to be a collaborative and participatory process involving learners, parents, teachers and school management.

The question of moral obligation consequently should not be framed as a choice between parents and teachers. Parents have direct and continuing responsibilities for the character, emotional welfare and conduct of their children, while teachers have professional and moral responsibilities arising from their daily authority, supervision and interaction with learners. When parents withdraw from school affairs, teachers may be left to address behavioural problems without adequate knowledge of learners' family circumstances. Conversely, when teachers use authoritarian practices, ignore grievances or fail to communicate with parents, difficulties that could have been resolved early may escalate. The prevention of unrest therefore requires consistent cooperation between the home and the school, supported by school administrators, boards of management, student councils, counsellors, communities and relevant government agencies.

Although previous studies have examined the causes of student unrest, school administrative practices, parental involvement, guidance and counselling and learner discipline, less attention has been directed towards the moral basis of the responsibilities carried by parents and teachers. Much of the existing discussion tends to allocate blame after unrest has occurred rather than examining what parents and teachers ought to do before dissatisfaction becomes destructive. There is therefore a need to move beyond determining who is at fault and examine how responsibility should be shared in promoting communication, moral

formation, learner welfare, fair discipline and peaceful resolution of grievances. Against this background, the article examines the causes of student unrest in Kenyan secondary schools, investigates the moral responsibilities of parents and teachers in promoting discipline within and outside school, and explores measures that educational stakeholders can adopt to prevent future unrest.

➤ *Statement of the Problem*

Student unrest remains a serious challenge in Kenyan secondary schools, disrupting learning, damaging property, and endangering the safety of learners and staff. It is commonly expressed through strikes, boycotts, vandalism, violence, and even arson. Despite various interventions, the problem persists. For example, the National Crime Research Centre reported over 130 cases of school arson in 2016, and the Ministry of Education recorded unrest in 204 schools in 2026, showing that the problem has not been effectively contained (National Crime Research Centre, 2017; Ministry of Education, 2026).

Research shows that student unrest is driven by multiple factors, including academic pressure, poor student-teacher relationships, weak guidance and counselling, authoritarian leadership, poor communication, harsh discipline, peer influence, substance abuse, and inadequate parental involvement. Studies in Kenya and other contexts further indicate that unrest often develops in environments where learners feel unheard, undervalued, and excluded from decision-making, meaning it is rarely caused by a single incident but by accumulated frustration and weak support systems (Wasonga & Makahamadze, 2020; Kinyua, 2019; Orodho, 2014). International research similarly shows that school violence and unrest are strongly linked to school climate, student voice, and the quality of relationships between learners and adults in authority (UNESCO, 2019; OECD, 2018).

Although Kenya has established policies such as the Basic Education Act and the National Education Sector Strategic Plan to promote discipline, participation, and learner welfare, many schools still experience weak communication, poor counselling services, and reactive disciplinary approaches that address symptoms rather than root causes (Republic of Kenya, 2013; Ministry of Education, 2023). Studies have shown that even where guidance and counselling structures exist, they are often under-resourced or implemented in a punitive rather than supportive manner, limiting their effectiveness in preventing unrest (Mutie & Ndambuki, 2017; Njoroge & Nyabuto, 2014).

A key concern is the unclear and often neglected moral responsibility of parents and teachers in preventing unrest. While parents are expected to provide moral guidance and emotional support, research indicates that some increasingly delegate discipline entirely to schools and only intervene after serious incidents occur (Nyaga, 2018; UNESCO, 2021). Similarly, studies on school discipline in Kenya show that some teachers and school administrators rely heavily on punitive measures, fail to engage learners meaningfully, and do not consistently involve parents in addressing emerging

behavioural problems (Ombuya, 2015; Kafu, 2011). This breakdown in shared responsibility leaves learners without consistent moral guidance and weakens early intervention mechanisms that could prevent escalation into unrest.

Most existing responses to student unrest focus on punishment, security, and restoring order after incidents occur. However, less attention has been given to the shared moral obligations of parents and teachers in preventing unrest before it happens. Educational research increasingly emphasises that effective discipline and violence prevention depend on strong home–school partnerships, positive school climate, and collaborative responsibility among stakeholders (Epstein, 2018; OECD, 2018). The continued gap in cooperation has contributed to persistent blame shifting between home and school, despite evidence that learners are shaped by both environments.

Therefore, this study addresses the problem by examining student unrest as both a disciplinary issue and a failure of shared moral responsibility. It seeks to identify the causes of unrest, explore the moral roles of parents and teachers, and propose preventive measures that strengthen cooperation between home and school in promoting discipline and stability in secondary schools.

➤ *Research Objective*

To examine the moral responsibilities of parents and teachers in preventing and addressing student unrest in secondary schools in Kenya.

➤ *Research Question*

What are the moral responsibilities of parents and teachers in preventing and addressing student unrest in secondary schools in Kenya?

II. LITERATURE REVIEW

➤ *Theoretical Review*

This article is anchored in Nel Noddings' Ethics of Care Theory. The theory is appropriate because student unrest is not merely an administrative, disciplinary, or security problem; it is also a moral and relational problem involving learners and the adults entrusted with their development. The Ethics of Care Theory explains moral responsibility through attentiveness, empathy, responsiveness, dialogue, and the quality of relationships between people. According to Noddings (2013), morality develops through concrete caring relationships in which one person recognises and responds to the needs and circumstances of another. In the school context, parents and teachers are therefore morally responsible not only for providing material support, academic instruction, and disciplinary rules, but also for understanding learners' experiences and responding appropriately to their legitimate concerns.

At the centre of the Ethics of Care Theory is the relationship between the one-caring and the cared-for. The one-caring pays attention to the needs, experiences, and well-being of another person, while the cared-for recognises and responds to the care received. Care is therefore more than an

emotional feeling or an occasional act of kindness. It is a sustained moral relationship characterised by attentiveness, empathy, commitment, and responsiveness (Noddings, 2013). In unequal relationships, such as those between parents and children or teachers and students, adults bear greater responsibility because learners are still developing emotionally, socially, intellectually, and morally. Parents and teachers consequently have a moral obligation to identify signs of frustration, distress, isolation, aggression, or behavioural change before such conditions develop into serious indiscipline or collective violence.

Noddings (2013) identifies four major components of moral education: modelling, dialogue, practice, and confirmation. These components provide a useful framework for understanding the responsibilities of parents and teachers in preventing and addressing student unrest. Modelling requires adults to demonstrate through their own conduct the moral qualities they expect learners to develop. Parents and teachers should therefore model fairness, self-control, respect, patience, honesty, responsibility, and peaceful conflict resolution. Learners are unlikely to internalise moral values when the adults around them use intimidation, aggression, humiliation, or inconsistent standards to resolve disagreements.

Within the family, parents serve as children's earliest moral models. The manner in which parents communicate, manage conflict, exercise authority, and respond to wrongdoing shapes children's understanding of acceptable behaviour. Parents who respond to disagreements through violence, hostility, neglect, or excessive punishment may unintentionally teach children that power and aggression are legitimate ways of resolving conflict. Conversely, parents who listen, explain decisions, impose reasonable consequences, and demonstrate respect are more likely to foster responsibility and self-discipline among their children. The Children Act of Kenya similarly recognises parents' responsibility to provide children with guidance in matters of appropriate social conduct and moral values (Children Act, 2022).

Teachers also act as important moral models because of the authority they exercise and the amount of time they spend with learners. Their responsibility extends beyond teaching academic content to demonstrating the ethical use of authority. Teachers who humiliate learners, enforce rules selectively, ignore legitimate grievances, or rely excessively on coercive discipline may weaken trust and contribute to resentment. By contrast, teachers who exercise authority fairly, communicate respectfully, and apply rules consistently help create a moral environment in which learners understand that discipline is intended to promote responsibility rather than fear. Chen and Shih (2025) observe that caring teacher–student relationships support learners' emotional, social, and intellectual development and strengthen the moral character of educational environments.

The second component of the theory is dialogue. Noddings (2013) argues that caring relationships require open communication in which individuals listen to one another and

attempt to understand different experiences and perspectives. Dialogue does not require parents or teachers to agree with every demand made by learners. Instead, it requires adults to provide safe and credible opportunities through which learners can express concerns, ask questions, and communicate grievances without automatically being dismissed as rebellious or indisciplined.

Dialogue is particularly important in preventing student unrest because collective violence may emerge after learners believe that peaceful methods of communication have failed. Students may have concerns relating to food, academic pressure, school schedules, examination arrangements, bullying, harsh treatment, poor facilities, or administrative decisions. When such grievances are ignored or suppressed, frustration may accumulate until a relatively minor incident triggers collective protest. Wasonga and Makahamadze (2020) found that student protests and violence in Kenyan boarding schools were partly associated with institutional environments in which learners felt devalued, excessively controlled, and excluded from decisions affecting their school lives. Establishing student councils, class meetings, grievance procedures, and regular dialogue forums may therefore help schools identify and resolve problems before they develop into unrest.

The third component is practice. Moral values cannot be developed through theoretical instruction alone; learners require opportunities to practise responsibility, care, self-control, cooperation, and peaceful conflict resolution. Schools should therefore involve students in peer counselling, mentorship programmes, student councils, restorative conferences, clubs, classroom discussions, and appropriate decision-making processes. Such activities enable learners to develop the ability to listen to others, negotiate differences, accept responsibility, and appreciate the consequences of their conduct. Kariithi et al. (2022) found that peer-counselling interventions were positively associated with improved student discipline in public secondary schools in Kiambu County, Kenya. Their findings demonstrate that learners can become active participants in creating disciplined and peaceful school environments when they are provided with adequate training and adult guidance.

The fourth component is confirmation. Confirmation involves recognising the learner's capacity for responsible moral conduct and guiding the learner towards a better course of action. It does not mean overlooking wrongdoing or excusing destructive behaviour. Rather, it requires parents and teachers to correct learners without denying their dignity or their potential for improvement (Noddings, 2013). A caring response to misconduct therefore combines accountability with guidance. Learners who damage property, threaten others, or participate in violent unrest should be held responsible for their conduct, but disciplinary measures should also encourage reflection, restitution, counselling, and behavioural change.

Applied to parents, the Ethics of Care Theory suggests that moral responsibility begins with continuous attention to the learner's welfare, behaviour, and emotional development.

Parents are expected to provide guidance, supervision, correction, emotional support, and appropriate moral instruction. Enrolling a child in a boarding school does not transfer the entire responsibility for the learner's conduct to teachers. Parents should maintain regular communication with both the learner and the school, attend meetings, respond promptly to behavioural concerns, and seek to understand the personal or family conditions that may influence the learner's behaviour. The Basic Education Act recognises parents' role in the character development of their children and provides for their participation in guiding, counselling, and disciplining learners through Parents Associations (Basic Education Act, 2013).

Applied to teachers, the theory requires a movement away from viewing learners solely as individuals who must be controlled. Learners should instead be treated as developing persons who require guidance, belonging, encouragement, and respectful correction. Teachers have the authority to enforce school rules, but the moral legitimacy of that authority depends on fairness, consistency, and concern for learners' welfare. A teacher guided by the ethics of care identifies changes in learners' behaviour, listens to grievances, provides counselling or referral, communicates with parents, and applies disciplinary measures that promote moral learning rather than humiliation.

The Ethics of Care Theory is particularly relevant to student unrest because it draws attention to the relational conditions within the home and school that may either prevent or encourage violence. Where learners experience neglect, inconsistent discipline, hostile teacher-student relationships, inadequate parental support, or exclusion from school decision-making, their sense of belonging may weaken. Wasonga and Makahamadze (2020) found that limited student representation and authoritarian school structures contributed to feelings of powerlessness among learners. The theory therefore supports the creation of school environments founded on respectful communication, responsive leadership, student participation, parental involvement, and fair discipline.

Nevertheless, the Ethics of Care Theory has limitations. Excessive emphasis on understanding and responsiveness may be misunderstood as weakening adult authority or excusing misconduct. Care alone may also be insufficient where student unrest involves deliberate arson, criminal activity, substance abuse, physical violence, or threats to life. Therefore, a care-based approach should operate alongside justice, accountability, school regulations, and relevant legal procedures. Learners who participate in destructive unrest should be held accountable, but the disciplinary process should remain fair, proportionate, corrective, and respectful of their dignity. The theory is therefore not used to eliminate discipline but to demonstrate that effective discipline should be grounded in responsible relationships, moral guidance, fairness, and concern for learners' welfare.

➤ *Empirical Review*

Student unrest in Kenyan secondary schools has been examined through government inquiries, institutional reports,

and academic studies. The available evidence shows that unrest rarely results from a single isolated factor. Instead, it develops through the interaction of school leadership, academic pressure, learner welfare, peer influence, family circumstances, communication failures, disciplinary practices, and wider social conditions. The National Crime Research Centre's investigation into the school arson crisis established that more than 130 secondary schools experienced the burning of infrastructure between May and August 2016. The report concluded that the unrest was associated with several interconnected factors, including examination pressure, learner fatigue, peer solidarity, administrative weaknesses, poor communication, and inadequate institutional responses (National Crime Research Centre [NCRC], 2017).

Earlier government inquiries reviewed by the NCRC (2017) identified overloaded curricula, examination anxiety, poor school facilities, inadequate recreational opportunities, harsh rules, corporal punishment, ineffective guidance and counselling, and weak communication between students and administrators as major causes of unrest. Other contributing factors included peer pressure, substance abuse, poor parenting, economic hardship, changing social values, inadequate teacher commitment, and the mismanagement of school resources. The recurrence of these factors in different investigations demonstrates that student unrest is a multidimensional problem extending beyond individual misconduct. It reflects weaknesses within families, schools, and the broader social environment.

Many factors identified in previous investigations relate directly to the moral responsibilities of parents and teachers. Poor parenting, weak teacher–student relationships, ineffective counselling, lack of positive role models, and communication breakdown represent failures in moral guidance and adult responsibility. However, government reports have generally discussed these issues as administrative or disciplinary causes rather than examining them as failures by adults to fulfil their ethical obligations towards learners. The reports explain the conditions under which unrest occurs but give comparatively less attention to why parents and teachers have a moral duty to prevent those conditions from developing.

Wasonga and Makahamadze (2020) examined student protests and violence in Kenyan secondary schools through a qualitative narrative inquiry involving teachers, principals, and members of school communities. The study found that violent unrest occurred predominantly in boarding schools and was associated with environments in which learners experienced excessive control, devaluation, and limited opportunities to participate in decisions affecting them. The authors argued that some boarding schools continued to operate through authoritarian structures that restricted meaningful dialogue between learners and school authorities.

The findings by Wasonga and Makahamadze (2020) are Important in that they shift the discussion away from blaming learners exclusively and draw attention to the institutional conditions under which unrest develops. Their study suggests

that student violence may sometimes arise from accumulated experiences of exclusion, powerlessness, and failure by school authorities to respond to grievances. The researchers recommended the creation of formal mechanisms for student representation, peaceful negotiation, and democratic participation. These recommendations support the Ethics of Care Theory, which emphasises listening, dialogue, recognition, and responsiveness in relationships involving authority.

However, the study by Wasonga and Makahamadze (2020) was qualitative and relied on the narratives of selected participants. It did not include all categories of individuals directly involved in specific incidents of unrest. Its findings may therefore not be generalised to every secondary school in Kenya. Nevertheless, it offers valuable insight into how restrictive school environments, limited student participation, and weak communication may contribute to collective violence. It also demonstrates why teachers and school administrators have a responsibility to establish credible grievance-handling structures before student dissatisfaction escalates.

Kilel et al. (2023) investigated the mechanisms used by schools to address factors contributing to student unrest in secondary schools in Kisii County. The study involved Form Two students and class teachers and established that schools employed various strategies to promote discipline and reduce unrest. The authors recommended greater student participation in the formulation and implementation of school rules. Their findings indicate that learners are more likely to understand and respect rules when they are involved in appropriate consultation and when school authorities clearly explain the reasons behind institutional decisions.

Student participation does not remove the authority of principals, teachers, boards of management, or the Ministry of Education. Rather, it enables school administrators to understand learners' experiences and identify the possible effects of school policies on student welfare. From a moral perspective, consultation recognises learners as persons with dignity and developing capacity for responsible judgment. It also provides an opportunity for teachers to guide learners in balancing individual preferences with the interests and safety of the wider school community.

Research on teacher–student relationships further demonstrates that teachers influence learners' behaviour through the quality of their everyday interactions. Ten Bokkel et al. (2023) conducted a multilevel meta-analysis of 65 studies involving 185,881 learners and examined the relationship between affective teacher–student relationships, bullying, and peer victimisation. The study established that closer and less conflictual teacher–student relationships were associated with lower levels of bullying and victimisation. Although bullying and student unrest are different phenomena, both involve aggression, weakened school relationships, and diminished feelings of safety and belonging.

The findings by ten Bokkel et al. (2023) suggest that positive teacher–student relationships may serve as protective factors against harmful behaviour. Learners who trust their teachers may be more willing to report concerns, seek help, and use peaceful mechanisms to resolve grievances. In contrast, highly conflictual relationships may increase alienation, hostility, and resistance to school authority. Teachers' moral responsibility therefore includes building relationships in which learners feel respected, supported, and able to communicate their concerns.

Teachers also play a central role in identifying early warning signs of unrest. Changes in attendance, sudden hostility, withdrawal, destruction of minor property, circulation of threatening messages, increased conflict, or widespread dissatisfaction may indicate deeper problems within the school. Teachers who interact regularly with learners are well placed to identify these signs and initiate counselling, dialogue, or communication with parents. However, their ability to perform this role depends on adequate professional preparation, manageable workloads, functioning guidance and counselling departments, and support from school administrators.

Kariithi et al. (2022) examined peer-counselling behaviour-management interventions and student discipline in public secondary schools in Kiambu County. The study sampled deputy principals, guidance and counselling teachers, and students. It found a positive and statistically significant relationship between peer counselling and student discipline. The researchers recommended that schools regularly identify and train peer counsellors to enable them to support other learners.

Peer counselling is relevant to the prevention of unrest because learners may feel more comfortable discussing certain concerns with fellow students than with teachers or administrators. Properly trained peer counsellors can identify emerging dissatisfaction, encourage peaceful conflict resolution, and refer serious matters to responsible adults. Peer counselling also enables learners to participate in maintaining discipline rather than being treated only as potential offenders. However, it requires clear ethical guidelines, confidentiality, adult supervision, and appropriate referral procedures. It should complement rather than replace professional counselling and responsible teacher involvement.

Parental involvement has also been identified as an important factor in student discipline. Njugia et al. (2024) examined the influence of parental involvement on student discipline in public secondary schools in Turkana Central Sub-County. Using a concurrent mixed-method design, the study involved principals, deputy principals, teachers, and students. It established that parental involvement significantly influenced student discipline, although many parents were not effectively involved in disciplinary matters. The study recommended clearer communication between schools and families and greater parental participation in meetings concerning learners' behaviour.

The findings by Njugia et al. (2024) demonstrate that parents possess important knowledge about their children's behaviour, emotional conditions, friendships, and family experiences. Such information may help teachers understand the reasons behind behavioural changes and develop appropriate interventions. However, parental involvement should not begin only after a learner has been suspended, expelled, arrested, or implicated in the destruction of school property. Effective involvement requires parents to maintain regular communication with teachers, discuss school experiences with their children, monitor behavioural changes, and reinforce agreed standards of conduct at home.

The Basic Education Act further supports collaboration between parents and teachers by requiring secondary schools to establish Parents Associations. These associations are expected to promote constructive relationships between parents and teachers and assist school management in guiding, counselling, and disciplining learners (Basic Education Act, 2013). The legal framework therefore treats discipline and character formation as shared responsibilities rather than as duties belonging exclusively to schools.

Despite the legal recognition of shared responsibility, parents and teachers may blame one another when learners become involved in unrest. Some parents believe that schools should assume complete responsibility for children during the school term, particularly where learners are enrolled in boarding schools. Some teachers, in turn, attribute student misconduct mainly to poor parenting without considering the effects of school leadership, teacher behaviour, academic pressure, and learner welfare. Such blame shifting weakens cooperation and delays early intervention. The evidence reviewed indicates that neither parents nor teachers can prevent student unrest independently.

Existing literature tends to examine parental involvement and teacher practices separately. Studies on parents commonly focus on meeting attendance, fee payment, supervision, home discipline, and responses to disciplinary cases. Studies concerning teachers mainly examine school administration, guidance and counselling, student participation, rule enforcement, and teacher–student relationships. Comparatively limited attention has been given to how the moral responsibilities of parents and teachers interact across the home and school environments.

A further limitation is that many studies examine student Indiscipline generally rather than collective student unrest specifically. Indiscipline may include lateness, truancy, disobedience, bullying, substance abuse, and failure to complete schoolwork. Student unrest, by contrast, usually involves collective actions such as strikes, demonstrations, class boycotts, vandalism, destruction of property, or arson. Although unresolved indiscipline may contribute to unrest, the two concepts should not be treated as identical. More focused analysis is required to understand how parental neglect, ineffective teacher–student relationships, authoritarian leadership, weak communication, and inadequate moral guidance may interact to produce collective violence.

The reviewed studies demonstrate that preventing student unrest requires more than surveillance, punishment, suspension, expulsion, or the reconstruction of damaged school property. Effective prevention requires early identification of grievances, supportive teacher–student relationships, active parental involvement, professional counselling, student representation, consistent discipline, moral modelling, and regular communication between the home and school. However, previous studies have mainly presented these interventions as administrative practices rather than as moral obligations arising from the responsibilities of parents and teachers.

This article addresses the identified gap by examining why parents and teachers have distinct but complementary moral responsibilities in preventing and addressing student unrest. Parents have a duty to provide continuous moral guidance, supervision, emotional support, and communication with schools. Teachers have a duty to exercise authority fairly, model responsible conduct, identify emerging concerns, listen to learners, and implement corrective rather than degrading disciplinary measures. Both groups have a shared obligation to cooperate, maintain consistent moral expectations, and create conditions in which learners can express grievances and accept responsibility without resorting to violence.

III. METHODOLOGY

➤ *Research Design*

The study adopted a qualitative narrative literature review design. This design was suitable for examining existing knowledge on the moral responsibilities of parents and teachers in preventing and addressing student unrest in secondary schools in Kenya.

➤ *Data Sources and Selection*

Relevant literature was obtained from peer-reviewed journal articles, government reports, education policies, legislation, and publications by recognised institutions. The review focused on sources addressing student unrest, learner discipline, parental involvement, teacher–student relationships, guidance and counselling, school leadership, and moral responsibility. Priority was given to recent sources, although older foundational works were included where theoretically relevant.

➤ *Data Analysis*

The selected literature was analysed thematically. Information was organised around key themes, including parental moral responsibility, teachers' moral responsibility, communication with learners, moral modelling, guidance and counselling, discipline, learner participation, and cooperation between families and schools. The themes were interpreted using Noddings' Ethics of Care Theory.

➤ *Ethical Considerations*

The study relied entirely on publicly available secondary sources. All ideas and findings drawn from other authors were acknowledged through appropriate APA in-text citations and referencing.

IV. FINDINGS AND DISCUSSION

The thematic analysis of the reviewed literature identified five interrelated moral responsibilities of parents and teachers in preventing and addressing student unrest in Kenyan secondary schools. These were moral modelling and character formation, attentive care and early intervention, open communication and learner participation, fair discipline and accountability, and sustained cooperation between the home and school.

➤ *Moral Modelling and Character Formation*

The review established that parents and teachers have a moral responsibility to model the conduct they expect from learners. According to Noddings (2013), moral education occurs not only through instruction but also through the examples provided by adults. Learners observe how parents and teachers exercise authority, communicate, manage disagreements, and respond to wrongdoing. Adults who use aggression, humiliation, threats, or inconsistent disciplinary practices may unintentionally teach learners that conflict can be resolved through force.

Parents are the first agents of moral formation and are expected to teach children respect, self-control, responsibility, honesty, and peaceful conflict resolution. The Children Act (2022) similarly recognises parents' responsibility to provide appropriate guidance concerning children's social conduct and moral values. Parental responsibility therefore extends beyond providing school fees, food, and other material needs. It includes shaping behaviour, monitoring friendships, correcting misconduct, and helping children understand the consequences of their actions.

Teachers also serve as moral models because they exercise authority over learners within the school environment. Their conduct affects how learners understand fairness, justice, care, and responsible leadership. Teachers who listen to learners, apply rules consistently, and resolve disagreements respectfully strengthen the moral legitimacy of school authority. Chen and Shih (2025) argue that caring teacher–student relationships promote emotional well-being, social responsibility, and a stronger sense of belonging. Therefore, preventing unrest requires parents and teachers to demonstrate the moral values they expect learners to practise.

➤ *Attentive Care and Early Intervention*

The findings further indicate that parents and teachers have a moral obligation to identify and respond to the early signs of learner dissatisfaction. Student unrest rarely develops without warning. Changes such as withdrawal, hostility, absenteeism, persistent complaints, minor property destruction, conflict with authority, or the circulation of threatening messages may indicate deeper emotional or institutional problems.

Noddings' Ethics of Care requires adults to be attentive to learners' needs and experiences rather than reacting only after serious misconduct has occurred (Noddings, 2013). Parents should regularly communicate with their children

about their school experiences, academic pressure, relationships with teachers, peer influence, and personal difficulties. Such communication may reveal concerns that learners are unwilling to report directly to school administrators.

Teachers are similarly expected to observe changes in learners' behaviour and initiate appropriate interventions. Their daily interaction with students places them in a strong position to identify frustration, anxiety, isolation, aggression, or declining interest in school activities. Early responses may include counselling, communication with parents, referral to relevant professionals, or dialogue with school administrators.

The National Crime Research Centre (2017) found that student unrest and school arson resulted from the convergence of several factors, including examination pressure, learner fatigue, poor communication, peer influence, and administrative weaknesses. This suggests that early attention to learners' welfare may prevent individual concerns from developing into collective violence. Moral responsibility therefore requires adults to act before a crisis rather than waiting until learners destroy property or endanger lives.

➤ *Communication, Dialogue and Learner Participation*

The review established that open communication is central to preventing student unrest. Learners may resort to collective protest when they believe that peaceful channels of communication are ineffective or unavailable. Parents and teachers therefore have a moral obligation to listen to learners and provide credible avenues through which grievances can be expressed and addressed.

Wasonga and Makahamadze (2020) found that protest and violence in Kenyan boarding schools were associated with environments in which learners experienced excessive control, devaluation, and exclusion from decisions affecting their lives. The authors recommended student representation, dialogue, peaceful negotiation, and greater participation in school decision-making. These findings do not justify vandalism or violence. Instead, they show that ignoring grievances may allow dissatisfaction to accumulate until it is expressed destructively.

Teachers and school administrators should provide regular forums through which learners can raise concerns relating to food, academic schedules, examinations, bullying, discipline, facilities, and general welfare. Student councils, class meetings, suggestion boxes, guidance and counselling departments, and dialogue forums can support peaceful communication. However, such structures must be functional and trusted by learners. Establishing a student council without considering its concerns would not constitute meaningful participation.

Parents also have a duty to listen to their children while discouraging violence and disrespect for school authority. They should distinguish between supporting legitimate concerns and defending misconduct. When children raise

grievances, parents should communicate constructively with teachers rather than immediately confronting the school or dismissing the learner's concerns. Dialogue between parents, teachers, and learners can clarify misunderstandings and identify solutions before conflict escalates.

The Basic Education Act (2013) supports stakeholder participation, democratic decision-making, and respect for learners' views. It also provides for Parents Associations that promote cooperation between parents and teachers. Learner participation should therefore be understood as guided involvement rather than the removal of adult authority. It allows adults to exercise authority with greater understanding, fairness, and responsiveness.

➤ *Guidance, Counselling and Moral Support*

The findings also show that effective guidance and counselling are essential moral responsibilities of schools and families. Some learners participate in unrest because they lack appropriate ways of coping with academic stress, peer pressure, conflict, emotional distress, or dissatisfaction with school conditions. Punishment alone may suppress misconduct temporarily without addressing these underlying difficulties.

Kariithi et al. (2022) established a positive and statistically significant relationship between peer-counselling interventions and student discipline in public secondary schools in Kiambu County. Peer counsellors can help learners discuss concerns, resolve interpersonal conflicts, and seek adult assistance before problems become serious. However, peer counsellors require proper training, confidentiality guidelines, supervision, and clear referral procedures.

Teachers should ensure that guidance and counselling departments are accessible, confidential, and adequately supported. Counselling should not be treated as a service reserved only for learners who have already committed offences. It should form part of the school's preventive approach to discipline and learner welfare.

Parents also have a responsibility to provide emotional support and cooperate with school counsellors. They should avoid dismissing behavioural or emotional difficulties as ordinary disobedience. Where necessary, parents and teachers should jointly seek professional psychological, medical, or social support for affected learners. Such cooperation reflects care for the learner while protecting the wider school community.

➤ *Fair Discipline and Moral Accountability*

The review revealed that care should not be confused with the absence of discipline. Parents and teachers have a moral responsibility to hold learners accountable for misconduct while ensuring that disciplinary measures remain fair, proportionate, and corrective. Learners who participate in violence, arson, intimidation, or destruction of property should accept responsibility for their actions. However, accountability should aim at behavioural change rather than humiliation or revenge.

Noddings (2013) explains that confirmation involves recognising a learner's capacity to improve while correcting unacceptable behaviour. This approach requires adults to condemn wrongdoing without permanently defining the learner by the offence committed. Disciplinary responses may therefore include counselling, restitution, apology, behavioural agreements, parental involvement, community service, and other corrective measures permitted within the education system.

The Basic Education Act (2013) prohibits cruel, inhuman, or degrading treatment of learners. Discipline should consequently respect due process and the dignity of the child. Inconsistent punishment, collective punishment, favouritism, and public humiliation may increase resentment and weaken learners' trust in school authority. Fair discipline requires clear rules, consistent enforcement, an opportunity for the learner to be heard, and consequences that correspond with the seriousness of the misconduct.

Parents should support legitimate disciplinary action rather than automatically defending their children. At the same time, they should ensure that disciplinary procedures are fair and do not violate learners' rights. Teachers should communicate the reasons for disciplinary decisions and involve parents before behavioural problems reach crisis level. Care and accountability should therefore operate together in preventing and addressing unrest.

➤ *Cooperation Between Parents and Teachers*

The central finding of the review is that preventing student unrest is a shared moral responsibility. Neither parents nor teachers can fulfil this responsibility independently. Learners move between the home and school environments, and their behaviour is influenced by the values, relationships, and expectations found in both settings.

Njugia et al. (2024) established that parental involvement significantly influenced student discipline in public secondary schools in Turkana Central Sub-County. However, the study found that parents were not effectively involved in many disciplinary matters. This shows that parental participation should extend beyond attending meetings after a serious incident has occurred. Parents should communicate regularly with teachers, monitor their children's behaviour, participate in school programmes, and reinforce agreed standards of conduct at home.

Teachers should also avoid contacting parents only when learners have committed serious offences. Regular communication allows parents and teachers to share information, identify changes in behaviour, and develop consistent interventions. Where learners receive contradictory messages from parents and teachers, they may exploit the differences or become uncertain about acceptable conduct.

The Basic Education Act (2013) recognises this shared responsibility by requiring secondary schools to establish Parents Associations that assist in guiding, counselling, and disciplining learners. Effective cooperation should therefore

include parent-teacher meetings, joint counselling, regular progress reports, shared behaviour-management plans, and participation in school welfare programmes.

➤ *Addressing Unrest after it Occurs*

Where unrest has already occurred, the immediate responsibility of parents and teachers is to protect life, restore safety, and prevent further harm. After the situation has been contained, schools should investigate both the actions of individual learners and the underlying grievances that contributed to the unrest. Focusing only on identifying and punishing offenders may leave the original causes unresolved.

Parents should cooperate with investigations, discourage retaliation, and support appropriate accountability. Teachers and administrators should communicate transparently, provide counselling to affected learners and staff, assess damage, and review the effectiveness of existing grievance and discipline systems. Learners who were not directly involved should not be subjected to indiscriminate punishment.

The National Crime Research Centre (2017) demonstrates that school unrest results from interconnected factors rather than a single cause. Post-unrest responses should therefore include institutional reflection. Schools should examine whether communication channels failed, warning signs were ignored, counselling services were inadequate, or learner welfare concerns remained unresolved. Addressing these weaknesses reduces the likelihood of recurrence.

➤ *Overall Discussion*

The findings demonstrate that the moral responsibilities of parents and teachers are complementary. Parents carry the primary responsibility for early moral formation, supervision, emotional support, and reinforcement of appropriate behaviour. Teachers are responsible for exercising school authority fairly, creating supportive relationships, identifying warning signs, listening to grievances, and providing guidance and counselling. Both groups share responsibility for communication, moral modelling, accountability, and early intervention.

These findings support Noddings' Ethics of Care Theory, which understands moral responsibility as attentiveness and responsiveness within relationships (Noddings, 2013). However, the findings also show that care must be balanced with justice and accountability. Preventing student unrest does not require adults to accept every learner demand or overlook destructive behaviour. It requires them to exercise authority in ways that are fair, responsive, consistent, and respectful of learners' dignity.

Student unrest should therefore not be framed as evidence of parental failure alone or teacher failure alone. It reflects weaknesses that may exist across the home, school, and wider social environment. Sustainable prevention requires a coordinated moral community in which parents and teachers model responsible conduct, listen to learners,

respond to emerging concerns, enforce fair discipline, and cooperate in promoting peaceful and accountable behaviour.

V. CONCLUSION AND RECOMMENDATIONS

➤ Conclusion

The study concludes that preventing and addressing student unrest in Kenyan secondary schools is a shared moral responsibility of parents and teachers. Student unrest cannot be explained only as learner indiscipline because it is also associated with ineffective communication, inadequate guidance and counselling, academic pressure, poor teacher–student relationships, weak parental involvement, unfair disciplinary practices, and limited opportunities for learners to express grievances.

Parents have a moral responsibility to provide continuous guidance, supervision, emotional support, and appropriate correction. Their responsibility does not end when learners enrol in boarding or day schools. Teachers similarly have a duty to model responsible conduct, exercise authority fairly, identify early signs of dissatisfaction, listen to learners, and apply disciplinary measures that promote accountability and behavioural change.

The study further concludes that care and discipline should complement each other. Caring for learners does not mean tolerating violence, arson, vandalism, or other forms of misconduct. Rather, it requires adults to hold learners accountable through fair, proportionate, and corrective processes. Consistent cooperation between parents, teachers, school administrators, and learners is therefore necessary for creating safe and disciplined school environments.

➤ Recommendations

Parents should maintain regular communication with their children and teachers, monitor behavioural changes, attend school meetings, and participate actively in resolving disciplinary and welfare concerns.

Teachers and school administrators should establish trusted communication channels through which learners can express grievances before dissatisfaction develops into unrest. Student councils, class meetings, counselling departments, suggestion boxes, and regular dialogue forums should be strengthened.

Schools should improve guidance and counselling services by training teacher counsellors and peer counsellors and providing clear procedures for referring learners who require specialised support.

Disciplinary measures should be fair, consistent, proportionate, and respectful of learners' dignity. Schools should combine accountability with counselling, restitution, behavioural agreements, and restorative approaches.

Parents and teachers should model respect, self-control, responsibility, and peaceful conflict resolution in their relationships with learners and with one another.

Finally, the Ministry of Education and school boards of management should strengthen parent–teacher cooperation, learner participation, values education, counselling programmes, and early-warning systems for identifying and addressing emerging signs of unrest.

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