

BEYOND THE CLASSROOM: UNDERSTANDING PARENTAL DISENGAGEMENT IN RURAL SOUTH AFRICAN SCHOOLS

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Abstract

Parental engagement is a critical factor influencing learner success, yet disengagement remains high in rural communities in South Africa due to systemic and cultural constraints. Although the importance of home–school collaboration is well documented, research exploring the lived experiences of rural parents and teachers remains limited. This study addressed two research questions: (1) What are the barriers to parental involvement in rural schools? and (2) How do parents and teachers perceive strategies to improve parental engagement? Using a qualitative case study design, semi-structured interviews were conducted with ten parents, while online open-ended questionnaires were administered to ten teachers from a rural school in KwaZulu-Natal. Semi-structured interviews captured parents' lived experiences and perceptions of parental involvement, allowing flexible probing of culturally sensitive issues such as power relations, gender norms, and communication barriers. Online open-ended questionnaires were used with teachers due to time constraints related to examination duties and to avoid disruption of the academic programme; however, a face-to-face introduction was conducted to explain the study and obtain consent. This instrument enabled teachers to reflect on their experiences at their convenience while providing rich qualitative data. Thematic analysis identified key barriers, including poor communication, restrictive cultural norms, competing responsibilities, and mutual distrust. Verbatim responses revealed power imbalances and feelings of powerlessness among parents. Findings are interpreted through Epstein's model, highlighting gaps in communication, parenting, and decision-making. Although limited in scope, the study offers critical insights and proposes short-term interventions and long-term reforms to support inclusive and culturally responsive school–family collaboration.

Keywords: parental involvement, rural education, school-family collaboration, Epstein's theory, educational equity

Introduction

Parental involvement, defined as parental efforts to support children's academic growth in collaboration with educators (Kalaycı & Ergül, 2020), significantly influences learners' performance. Engagement includes both home-based and school-based actions, such as offering emotional support and participating in school activities (Munje & Mncube, 2018). The American Psychological Association (2019) highlights its positive impact on learner discipline, social-emotional development, and academic success.

In South Africa, educational reform post 1994 emphasised the importance of parental participation as a transformative tool (Msila, 2012). Despite this approach, parental engagement remains inconsistent, especially in rural schools where socioeconomic hardship, cultural norms, and limited school resources hinder involvement.

Global Benefits of Parental Involvement

Parental involvement is widely recognised as an essential intervention for academic achievement in education systems around the world. Meta-analyses indicate a favourable link between active parental involvement and learner academic achievement, which is typically mediated by higher motivation and stronger interactions between learners and teachers (Özyıldırım, 2024). In Finland, parental involvement is closely tied to educational policies and school culture. Parents are seen as collaborative partners, interacting with teachers through established channels and participating in decision-making processes at all levels (Virtanen & Rönkä, 2022). Similarly, in the United States, initiatives such as the National Standards for Family-School Partnerships and state policies under the Every Student Succeeds Act encourage organised and ongoing communication between families and schools, leading to more consistent and effective parent engagement (Bryk, 2021; National PTA, 2022). These examples demonstrate how formal processes and supportive school climates facilitate meaningful parent-school relationships, resulting in improved academic outcomes.

South African and Global Barriers

In contrast, developing countries, particularly in sub-Saharan Africa, face distinct challenges including limited parental literacy, cultural misalignments, and infrastructural inadequacies (González-Peña & Malmberg, 2023). These issues mirror the South African context, especially in rural Provinces such as KwaZulu-Natal. In South Africa, Mkhize and Davids (2023) note that economic hardship and resource mobilisation deficiencies are critical barriers to sustained parental involvement. Amnesty International (2020) and Sibanda (2021) also cite school infrastructure, poor governance, and outdated engagement methods as limiting factors. Further, some cultures perceive education as a teacher-only responsibility, thus diminishing parental agency. These observations highlight the importance of community-based, low-tech, and culturally sensitive approaches in promoting parental involvement in rural schools.

International Strategies

Several global initiatives have demonstrated effective strategies for increasing parental involvement and reducing disengagement in rural and under-resourced schools. In the UK, schools have implemented community-based measures to increase confidence and capacity, such as establishing parent councils through legislation, such as the Scottish

Parental Involvement Act. A national evaluation found that these forums, combined with regular parent-teacher contact, such as newsletters, positive feedback, and events, increased parental confidence and improved support for learning at home (Scottish Schools Parental Involvement Act, 2006; Education Scotland, 2023).

Similarly, in Australia, the EPIC (Engaging Parents in Curriculum) model encourages parents, carers and teachers to collaborate on curriculum activities in the classroom. According to Willis et al. (2021), out-of-class engagement techniques, such as parent story sessions, field trips, and homework support, can improve learner literacy and increase parental self-efficacy in teaching.

In China, ICT-based co-teaching, where urban teachers deliver remote lessons in rural classrooms, combined with active parent facilitation, has yielded excellent results. Parents who helped coordinate remote lessons gained a better understanding of the curriculum, which led to increased confidence and better academic supervision at home (Guo et al., 2022).

Purpose of the Study

While earlier studies (Munje & Mncube, 2018; Yulianti et al., 2022) examined school-led engagement efforts, few have centred on rural parents' lived experiences. This study addresses that gap by capturing both parental and teacher perspectives on barriers to involvement in a rural KwaZulu-Natal setting.

Research Questions

This study answered the following research questions: (1) What are the barriers that limit parental involvement in rural South African schools? (2) How do parents and teachers perceive possible strategies to overcome these barriers?

Theoretical Framework

Epstein's Overlapping Spheres of Influence theory (2001, 2009, 2011) provides the foundation for understanding how the interaction of school, family, and community impacts learner outcomes. Her model outlines six typologies: parenting, communication, volunteering, home learning, decision-making, and community collaboration. Each approach plays a pivotal role in promoting student success through meaningful engagement.

Parenting focuses on equipping families with the tools and support necessary to create home environments conducive to learning. In rural areas, this often means addressing parental illiteracy or providing household strategies that support learner routines. Communication emphasises bidirectional information sharing, which is especially crucial in rural areas where formal notices often do not reach parents due to technological or logistical limitations. Volunteering involves participating in school-based events or activities. In remote settings, this must be flexible and culturally inclusive due to transport and work constraints.

Learning at home often involves informal educational support, such as storytelling or discussing school matters, which can be particularly effective in contexts where parents lack formal educational backgrounds. Decision-making involves parents participating in school governance structures such as School Governing Bodies (SGBs), which in many rural settings remain underutilised. Community collaboration is essential in mobilising resources from local churches, Non-Governmental Organisations (NGOs), and traditional leaders to support learners and families. By adapting each of these typologies to the local context, rural schools can foster meaningful parental engagement. This study uses Epstein's method to analyse the structural and relational gaps reported by participants, particularly in communication, parental support, and involvement in decision-making.

Method

This study used a qualitative case study method, focusing on a rural school in KwaZulu-Natal. The location was chosen because it consistently had low levels of parental involvement and was accessible to the researcher as a local teacher. Ten parents and ten teachers were purposefully selected based on their willingness and availability to participate in the study. The teachers represented a range of subjects and grade levels, while the parents were typically mothers and grandmothers who were active participants in family activities. Data were collected through semi-structured interviews and open-ended questionnaires. All participants provided written informed consent. Interviews were conducted in isiZulu and later translated into English for analysis. Braun and Clarke's (2006, 2021) six-step technique was employed for thematic analysis, comprising data familiarisation, code generation, topic search, theme review, theme definition and naming, and report production. The University of Zululand Research Ethics Committee granted ethical approval. All participants were given pseudonyms, and confidentiality was ensured throughout the process.

Participant Demographics

Participants for this study were selected through purposive sampling. The selected school was situated in a rural area with a history of low school performance rates and previous initiatives aimed at increasing parental involvement. This context makes it a particularly suitable setting for investigating the dynamics of school-parent involvement. The sample included ten parents whose children were enrolled in the school, making them appropriate informants on family-school involvement strategies. Parents were selected based on their availability and willingness to participate, and the sample included a mix of middle-aged male and female caregivers and grandparents. Additionally, ten teachers were selected, including male and female teachers responsible for teaching Grades 8 and 9. These teachers were chosen for their direct involvement with adolescent learners and regular contact with parents of learners in these grades, which provided them with significant insights into the nature and challenges of parental involvement.

Findings

This study reveals the following primary barriers to parental engagement: time constraints, communication gaps, low curriculum literacy, imbalanced accountability, and lack of coordinated strategies.

a) Communication Breakdown

Teachers reported that learners withheld school notices or gave incorrect contact details. Sometimes, parents change numbers or lose their phones and do not update the school about the changes, which results in communication hurdles. Teacher 4 mentioned the following:

“You send letters, no response. Even when we call, only one or two show up” (T4).

At the same time, Parent 6 had this to say: *“I don’t know anything happening at the school. They don’t tell us. I only go when my child is in trouble” (P6).*

The above verbatim quotes demonstrate that a communication problem exists in schools, which affects parental involvement and leads to disengagement between the school and parents.

b) Lack of Accountability/One-Sided Expectation

The teachers also expressed concerns over asymmetrical accountability, which is one-sided and biased. Only teachers are monitored; parents are not. Therefore, a system is desired for both parents and teachers to monitor both parties' roles in the communication process, so that both parties can account fairly. The teachers commented:

“Teachers are monitored by their supervisors and SACE, but nobody is monitoring parents” (T5).

However, one parent shared the following:

“Teachers want us to help, but we don’t even know what the homework is. How are we supposed to assist?” (P2)

Therefore, the teacher also noted the following:

“Parents want everything done by the school. They don’t attend meetings, don’t sign reports, but complain when children fail.” (T 1)

Based on the following, teachers felt disconnected from the school's decision-making and processes. This is how they expressed their feelings:

“We never get asked our views. The school just tells us what to do.” (P9) “No one monitors if parents help at home, but we get blamed when children fail” (T2).

It can be noted from this commentary that parent and teacher disengagement is a conundrum that needs to be swiftly addressed to help learners academically.

c) Parents' Prioritisation of Work

The parents cited challenges balancing work and educational support, noting sentiments like:

“It needs me as a parent to have time for my child when I come back from work to ask her about schoolwork.” (P8)

At the same time, another parent stressed out the following sentiments:

“Sometimes I want to go to school to check his work, but I have to go to work because we need money”

Some parents want to visit the school, but their obligations to their jobs hinder their desire to attend. Most families work on farms, as cleaners, or are self-employed. If they do not attend work, they do not receive payment or support for that day. Therefore, work also prevents parents from being involved in schools.

d) Cultural Norms and Social Barriers

Generally speaking, in most rural areas, culture and religion play a role in the community. Some of the causes of parental disengagement stem from cultural activities and norms, as well as religious considerations and other social expectations. P9 commented:

"In our culture, men don't go to school meetings. That is for women. And even women can't go if the father says no (P9)."

Some parents and teachers affirmed these views:

"Parents still think it's disrespectful to question the teacher. They're scared to talk" (T6).

"My husband says it's not a woman's place to speak at the school" (P6).

It is essential to acknowledge that these issues contribute to parental disengagement and must be addressed to enable rural areas to find solutions to their communication challenges.

e) Curriculum Challenges

There have been many curriculum changes in South Africa that have led to increased disengagement among parents. The curriculum makes it challenging for parents to stay up-to-date with educational trends and ways to support their children at home. Because what children are learning nowadays is completely different from what their parents know. Hence, these changes lead to parental disengagement.

"Sometimes my child shows me work, but I don't understand it. I'm scared to give wrong answers" (P3).

Meanwhile, parents confessed feeling inadequate:

"We try on our own, but a lot of things fail us because we are not professional about the things they learn" (P1).

As observed above, it is challenging for parents to support their children at home due to curriculum changes. Some parents are willing to help their children, but without proper orientation about the curriculum, it becomes complicated for them and may lead to frustration.

Discussion

These findings are consistent with Lemmer (2019)'s argument that traditional school governance arrangements in South Africa often marginalise minority voices. However, unlike Lemmer's study, which focuses on urban areas, this report demonstrates that cultural and gender patterns in rural households exacerbate this exclusion.

Furthermore, the findings also illustrate a systemic breakdown in shared responsibility between parents and educators in rural South African schools. This is consistent with the

findings of Mkhize and Davids (2023), who noted that parental disengagement in rural areas is often driven by power imbalances and ambiguous expectations. While both groups value learner success, they often operate in isolation.

Yulianti et al. (2022) found that regular communication between teachers and parents increases engagement; however, our research indicates that this contact is often irregular or unidirectional. Therefore, Epstein's theory is useful for identifying the interaction points among schools, families, and communities, yet the model must be tailored to local realities. For example, home learning should leverage traditional oral storytelling practices, while communication may require community radio and church announcements.

In comparison, countries such as Indonesia and Kenya have made progress in using mobile SMS systems and structured home visits between parents and teachers (Mugo et al., 2020; Yulianti et al., 2022). In Indonesia, for example, schools use SMS alerts to inform parents about meetings or student progress, while in Kenya, local leaders act as liaisons between schools and families. These low-cost, community-based solutions could help shape rural change in South Africa.

The findings indicate gaps in three of Epstein's six typologies: communication, parenting, and decision-making, highlighting areas where schools and families fail to interact effectively. Although this case study is limited to a single school, the findings offer themes that are generalizable and applicable to similarly resourced rural settings. Strategies should be regionally flexible, recognising that no single approach will eliminate disengagement, which may be useful for future comparative research or local policy development.

Limitations

The findings are based on a single school in KwaZulu-Natal and therefore cannot be generalised to the entire country. However, comparable demographic and physical factors in other rural areas indicate that the findings may have wider application. Future research should include multi-site case studies and long-term monitoring of engagement strategies.

Conclusion

To overcome these barriers, a multi-pronged strategy is required. First, schools should co-develop structured parental involvement programmes with the communities they serve, ensuring that expectations and roles are mutually understood. Digital communication channels, such as WhatsApp and SMS, should be optimised, but alternatives like radio and ward councillor announcements are essential for inclusivity. Monitoring parental involvement through points-based systems, such as rewarding attendance at meetings or homework signing, can increase accountability and engagement.

Additionally, weekend academic camps and after-school programmes should be collaboratively managed by parents and teachers to foster a culture of shared

responsibility. The Department of Basic Education must support these efforts with targeted funding and policy backing. Finally, School Governing Bodies should be capacitated to serve as community liaisons, promoting consistent follow-ups and bridging the communication divide between school and home.

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Appendix A: Conceptual Framework Details

The conceptual framework set out below illustrates a locally adapted model based on Epstein’s Six Typologies, contextualised for rural South African schools. It integrates context-sensitive interventions within each domain to enhance school-family-community collaboration:

Parenting: Literacy workshops and culturally relevant parenting sessions.

Communication: WhatsApp/SMS alerts, radio announcements, and church meetings.

Volunteering: Community-driven events, flexible timing for participation.

Learning at Home: Storytelling, daily conversation prompts, and home tasks.

Decision-Making: Parent training for SGB roles, inclusive school governance.

Community Collaboration: Partnerships with NGOs, churches, and local leaders.

This model positions families as co-educators while recognising structural and cultural realities of rural life. By leveraging existing community structures and oral traditions, the model fosters inclusive and sustainable educational engagement.