Teacher-Driven Strategies for Enhancing Parental Involvement in Rural Education

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Abstract

Parental involvement is widely acknowledged as a vital contributor to learners' academic achievement and overall school success. While much is known about the benefits of parental engagement, particularly in urban and well-resourced settings, the dynamics and challenges in rural schools remain underexplored. This study addresses that gap by investigating how teachers perceive and implement strategies to enhance parental involvement in rural contexts. Specifically, the study aimed to answer the following question: (1) What are teachers' perceptions and experiences regarding parental involvement in rural schools? and (2) What teacher-driven strategies do they propose to improve collaboration with parents? This qualitative case study draws on Rotter's Social Learning Theory to explain how behaviour is shaped by observation, reinforcement, and social interaction. The study was conducted at a rural high school in Mandlanzini Agri-village, KwaZulu-Natal, with ten purposively selected teachers as participants. Data were collected through a semi-structured online questionnaire and analysed thematically following Braun and Clarke's (2006) coding process. The findings reveal a pressing need for structured, teacher-driven strategies that extend beyond standard parent-teacher meetings to include structured and culturally responsive interventions. The study highlights the practical value of teacher agency in facilitating parental involvement and offers context-specific insights that may guide future interventions in similar rural settings.

Keywords: rural education; parental involvement; teacher strategies; collaboration; educational success

Introduction

Parental involvement is a cornerstone of academic success, as it enhances learners' motivation, emotional growth, and school behaviour (Anastasiou & Papagianni, 2020; Poon, 2020). However, fostering effective Collaboration between teachers and parents remains challenging, especially in rural areas, where socioeconomic barriers and cultural norms can hinder communication and engagement (Medarić et al., 2022). Similarly, Southeast Asia and Latin America reveal similar trends. For instance, in rural Indonesia, parents' low literacy levels and traditional educational beliefs hinder participation, mirroring challenges in South Africa (van Wyk & Lemmer, 2009). Likewise, in rural Colombia, parents often view the school as the primary authority on education, limiting their active involvement. Consequently, these findings highlight the need for culturally responsive and teacher-driven solutions to foster home-school partnerships.

Teachers frequently struggle to bridge these gaps, as many parents are unaware of their roles in their children's education or lack the tools and confidence to participate meaningfully (Liu et al., 2020). Therefore, the lack of parental involvement might lead to issues like dropout, failure rate, ill-discipline, and miscommunication. This study narrows its focus to examine teachers' perceptions of teacher-driven strategies

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for enhancing parental involvement and their proposed strategies for collaboration in rural schools. By understanding teachers' insights, the research aims to identify actionable, teacher-driven strategies that can enhance parental participation and improve learner outcomes. Using Rotter's Social Learning Theory as a framework assisted this study in emphasising the central role of teachers as mediators and facilitators of parent-school partnerships. Two guiding questions address the aim and purpose of the research. First, the study explores teachers' perceptions and real experiences regarding parental involvement in rural schools. Second, it examines the strategies that these teachers suggest to strengthen collaboration with parents, based on their perspective. These two research questions promote a better understanding of both the challenges and possible solutions, as perceived by rural educators.

Literature Review

Benefits of Parental Involvement

The encouragement and support that parental engagement provides is a tremendous stimulant for educational achievement and developing an appropriate mindset towards schools in general, academic performance, mental health and psychological growth, improved classroom behaviour, and a reduction in school dropout rates, as stressed by Anastasiou and Papagianni (2020). Chiefly, teachers acknowledge that parental involvement in education is crucial because it makes instruction delivery easier for them regarding discipline, homework accountability, and other matters involving teaching and learning. While the benefits of parental involvement are widely known, teachers sometimes face significant difficulties when trying to interact with parents, especially in rural areas.

Challenges Faced by Teachers

From the teachers' perception, they feel there are still challenges in collaborating with parents because they do not seem well-informed about their roles and responsibilities in their children's education. Liu et al. (2020) concur that parents are regarded as hurdles to the effective education of their children because they fail to recognise their critical role in their children's education, causing a division between them and the school. According to Anastasiou and Papagianni (2020), teachers may maintain a distance from parents to avoid interference with their jobs, making it challenging for both parties to participate. Additionally, teachers sense that distancing themselves from their parents is better because some parents are hard to deal with: Some parents regularly challenge teachers rather than have a discussion, and others always complain about taking a day off from work since it affects their income. Another crucial component of these problems is communication strategies between teachers and parents, which are sometimes poor or inaccessible in rural areas.

Challenges Faced by Parents in Rural Areas

According to the teachers' perceptions, hindrances to effective parental involvement include teachers frequently having difficulties reaching parents owing to financial hurdles, cultural differences, religious commitment and a lack of resources. Most rural parents may have inadequate education, hindering their capacity to contribute to their children's education effectively. Parents' educational level significantly impacts how well-prepared their children are to study at home since their parents find the present curriculum tough, as Anastasiou and Papagianni (2020) put forward. Likewise, communication issues, such as letters not reaching parents, calls on voice mail due to old or lost numbers, language barriers and a lack of access to digital communication tools in schools, make it difficult for teachers to interact successfully with parents. Barriers cited by teachers include parents' absence from school events, poor communication, limited resources, and apprehension over screening processes, as promulgated by Medarić et al. (2022). Furthermore, teachers see parents' lack of general knowledge, poor English proficiency, and low desire for engagement as barriers to parental involvement. These are considered some of the many challenges regarding parental involvement in education.

Proposed Solution and Teacher Strategies

Teachers proposed utilising various strategies to enhance parental involvement by leveraging social media platforms and other types of communication such as Tik-Tok, WhatsApp community groups, Facebook local newsgroups, local radio stations, local free newspapers, loud hailing and local TV for correspondence. They also proposed using community gatherings and churches to encourage parents and orientate them on how to be

3

Central European Journal of Educational Research 7(1) 2025. 24–31.

fully involved in their children's education even if they themselves are not educated. According to Mawela et al. (2017), some government organisations create social media accounts but do not use these platforms to improve stakeholder engagement, sometimes only using them to convey information about the school or governmental changes instead of promoting two-way discussions. Social media remains an underutilised tool for addressing challenges related to children's education, despite its substantial user base, as evidenced by the 27.1 million registered Facebook users in Southern Africa (Kemp, 2022). (Olszewski & Cullen-Conway, 2021). Additionally, Lin et al. (2022) highlight the need for further studies to understand the role of social media sites in increasing government-citizen relations.

According to Hendricks (2013), social media and education are increasingly inseparable, with teachers, learners, and parents in developed countries relying on social media forums to facilitate internal and external communication. However, it is important to note that computer-mediated communication (CMC), which includes social media platforms such as WhatsApp, Facebook, SMS, X (previously called Twitter), Microsoft Teams, and Instagram, as well as email and phone calls, are not substitutes for face-to-face communication between teachers and parents but rather complements it through ease of access and convenience (Wasserman & Zwebner, 2017).

For this purpose, Epstein & Sheldon (2019) recommends that each government agency designate someone to manage all social media profiles. The designated person will then be responsible for disseminating public information, monitoring interactions, and responding immediately to interested parties. Mkhomazi et al. (2020) highlight the need for establishing specialised social media regulations to oversee government employees' use of social media. Such a strategy is considered essential to enable the systematic and successful use of social media platforms for CMC and collaboration.

Consequently, teachers and school administrators may encourage parents to be more active in their children's education by personally reaching out to them and urging them to participate in various ways, as Yulianti, Denessen and Droop (2018) mentioned. Teachers confront several problems in promoting successful family engagement in education, ranging from communication hurdles and unfavourable impressions to misconceptions of parental responsibilities and requirements. Schools and parents must work together to establish a positive learning environment for learners and utilise all mediums and community gatherings to address these issues. The literature review and teachers' comments highlight the complexity of encouraging parental involvement in rural schools. This complexity validates the qualitative approach based on case studies, which allows for an in-depth and contextualized analysis of teachers' views and solutions. While this is the case, Rotter's (1966) social learning theory serves as the primary lens through which this study examines teacher-driven strategies. According to the theory, the interaction between individuals and their environment shapes behaviour, with a focus on reinforcement, observational learning, and locus of control. In education, this implies that when parents experience positive academic outcomes as a result of their involvement, whether through teacher modelling or social reinforcement, they are more likely to repeat that behaviour. This research uses Rotter's theory to describe how organised encouragement, accountability structures, and visible role models in the community can increase parental involvement.

Methods

The nature of the investigation often influences the choice of research technique (Rakotsoane, 2019). This study used a qualitative method, which involves understanding the natural flow of processes and occurrences and how participants interpret them, utilising non-interfering data-gathering methodologies (McMillan & Schumacher, 2010). Purposive nonprobability sampling was used to choose a sample from a population in a single school. This type of sampling involves randomly selecting a small sample, with a strong focus on information-rich samples rather than generalising research to the larger population (Struwig & Stead, 2004).

The research was a case study, a systematic and in-depth examination of one situation in its context. The case might be a person, a group of individuals, a school, a community, or an organisation (Best & Kahn, 2003). A case study is appropriate to see how social data is structured to understand a social reality. The researcher investigated teacher-driven strategies to enhance parental involvement in education, how familiar teachers are with the strategies for collaboration with parents, and their perception of the enrichment of learners' academic performance using the current strategies and their impact on shaping a child's learning experience. A rural school based in Mandlanzini Agri-village, located in the area of Richards Bay, KwaZulu-Natal, was specifically chosen because it is located in a historically neglected rural area with high dropout rates and low parental engagement, which is in line with the study's aim. The participating school had a diverse teaching staff and had

already initiated parent outreach initiatives, making it an appropriate case study to investigate teacher-driven strategies. Ten teachers were specifically selected based on their teaching experience, involvement in school and community projects, and grade levels taught. Five participants taught in grades 8, and the other in grade 9, which are important transitional years for learners in this context.

The study employed an interpretative paradigm to critically examine ways to enrich learners' academic performance through effective teacher-driven strategies for enhancing parental collaboration in education. This style of inquiry is concerned with accepting how people make sense of their daily lives. Schwant (2009) states that the interpretive technique allows researchers to focus on understanding what is happening in each setting since it helps determine how their participants' realities are created.

The researcher collected data through a semi-structured online questionnaire of ten questions that were put to the teachers (De Vos et al., 2011). The questionnaire included ten open-ended questions organised into three categories: (1) participants' experiences with parent involvement, (2) problems encountered during parent involvement, and (3) suggestions for increasing collaboration. Example questions included: "What challenges do you encounter when trying to involve parents?" and "What strategies have worked well to improve parent involvement?"

Employing a semi-structured online questionnaire in this study helped because it gave the researcher more flexibility when reaching out to participants. The study ultimately used an online questionnaire to acquire data from its participants. This tool was chosen for teachers since it was noted that most of them were busy with classes and exams throughout the week, making it difficult for the researcher to schedule visits with them for interviews.

The University of Zululand's ethics committee provided the initial ethical clearance to grant permission to conduct the study. Before performing the semi-structured online questionnaire, permission was obtained from the participating schools and the Department of Basic Education (DBE). Consent forms were pre-arranged for all participants. They were informed of the study's goal and rights and allowed to withdraw from the research at any moment should they not feel comfortable. The participant's right to privacy was honoured, and confidentiality was maintained. The actual names of the schools and participants were not disclosed; instead, pseudonyms were used.

A qualitative thematic analysis was performed on the dataset to address the research questions, after which the data were sorted, analysed, transcribed and coded into themes. This style of analysis is suited for the study paradigm and design since it results in coding, which ultimately allows the researcher to create his/her themes (De Vos et al., 2011). Data were analysed multiple times to identify recurring themes using Braun and Clarke's (2006) six-step thematic analysis methodology. The researcher manually categorised all responses, generating initial codes such as "lack of accountability", "poor communication" and "cultural/religious influence." Codes were organised and developed into broad themes such as "Accountability Imbalances", "Cultural Barriers" and "Engagement Strategies." This bottom-up approach ensured that themes were data-driven and representative of participants' language.

The data were evaluated thematically. De Vos et al. (2011) used thematic analysis to detect, categorise, and summarise findings. Data were transcribed and coded, and themes were found in the coded data (Braun & Clarke, 2006).

Findings

Key findings highlight teacher perceptions that current strategies for parental involvement are underutilised and lack accountability monitoring systems. Teachers propose strategies such as structured liaison roles, workshops tailored to teacher needs, and flexible engagement opportunities to bridge gaps in communication and collaboration. Direct quotes and participant examples were used to strengthen these findings.

Teachers' perceptions regarding the collaborative strategies

Appeal for revised strategies

Teachers emphasised that existing strategies are underutilised and require revision for greater impact. Some even state that the parents are completely uninformed about these strategies, so they do not show up when invited to school meetings. The teachers proposed that the strategies must be revised to be effective.

Parental accountability through monitoring by SGB

Teachers said that they are responsible for the learners at school. They are being monitored by the Department of Basic Education (DBE) and the South African Council for Educators (SACE) regarding their responsibilities. However, no one is monitoring whether the parents help their children with homework, meaning that parents have no one to account to if they do not track their children's schoolwork. This caused the teachers to complain about the imbalances with the system and that there are people who have to account for learners if they do not do well.

Regular school visits and communication

The participants believe that if these strategies can be implemented effectively, they can strongly help to enrich academic performance because constant supervision of learners' work gives them confidence and promotes a culture of scholarship. In addition, communication is the key for all stakeholders so that the goal of enriching the academic performance of learners through EPI can be easily achieved. Lastly, school visits are the key because they show how strong the bond between teachers, parents, and learners is in ensuring that the learners perform well and that the school produces good results. The findings focus on teachers' concerns about nonuse and lack of accountability in the current parent involvement programs. Teachers advocate new techniques to improve communication and cooperation, such as defined liaison positions, targeted workshops, and flexible participation opportunities. They point to the importance of parental responsibility, recommending that the school management body (SGB) monitor parents' involvement in their children's education. Regular school visits and regular communication between parents, teachers and learners are essential for cultivating a learning culture and improving academic success. Teachers believe that effectively implementing these measures can considerably improve learners' academic results and deepen collaboration between schools and parents. As a result, the participants emphasised the need for teachers to communicate with parents continuously in a structured way. They should agree on a communication strategy with those parents and praise them for attending school activities. Follow-up should be done, and SGBs should intervene where necessary.

Alternative strategies proposed by teachers

Camps and extramural activities

The teachers proposed camps and extramural activities as strategies that can help champion academic performance. As the data collected revealed, teachers normally provide extra classes in their free time and for their expenses.

Parental intervention programmes

They should be present in all school meetings, functions, decision-making sessions, and extracurricular activities because this helps build a strong relationship amongst all stakeholders. Moreover, parents must be aware of the child's well-being, academic needs, and other types of interventions. The issues of utmost importance was establishing programmes to help parents attend to school needs regarding the child's education. The matter should be referred to the school's parental governance board if the parents fail to attend.

Workshops for teachers and parents

Most teachers proposed that there should be workshops for teachers and parents to orient them about effective collaborative strategies and educational policies. One teacher mentioned that policies are always changing and the curriculum is always changing. Therefore, there is need to have workshops where they are kept updated with the new knowledge so employing strategies to enrich the academic performance of learners through EPI would be easier. While geographical challenges may limit school visits, parents can be encouraged to attend key meetings, events, and feedback sessions. Workshops can also discuss alternative ways for parents to participate, such as designated "parent liaison" groups or rotating schedules for school visits. Having parents actively involved in school activities, even if through structured rotation, ensures they remain engaged with the school's mission and their child's academic progress.

Discussion

Barriers to parental involvement in rural schools

Teachers have discovered numerous barriers that prevent successful parental involvement in schools. For instance, financial issues and professional responsibilities make it difficult for parents to engage with schools (Medarić et al., 2022). Hence, cultural and religious issues are also important, as some parents believe that education is primarily the duty of teachers (Liu et al., 2020). Additionally, he also found that in some rural areas of China, parents were staying away due to a lack of formal education (Liu et al., 2020). This research mirrors these beliefs, with one teacher stating, *"Some parents believe that helping their children interferes with their profession. They don't realise that we want them to participate."*

Furthermore, parents' lack of knowledge influences their confidence in supporting their children's education (Anastasiou & Papagianni, 2020). In fact, the absence of communication channels aggravates these difficulties. Many rural parents do not have access to digital communication tools, making it difficult to access teachers. Hence, the use of traditional methods such as greetings out loud and local media can be useful (Hendricks, 2013). Additionally, the current school communication techniques, such as letters and phone calls, are often ineffective due to outdated contact information.

The role of accountability in enhancing parental involvement

Teachers identified a lack of parental responsibility as a major concern. This is consistent with Rotter's social learning theory, which emphasises the importance of reinforcement and observation in shaping behaviour (Rotter, 1966). When parents witness other families acknowledging their efforts or observe positive outcomes in their children's academic performance, they are more likely to replicate that behaviour. Admittedly, Teachers emphasised that implementing formal arrangements of accountability and appreciation can serve as reinforcers that shape and normalise participation. Therefore, this reinforces the theory's assertion that learning occurs in a social environment through modelling, reinforcement, and self-efficacy.

Parents have no official accountability systems, unlike teachers, supervised by the South African Council of Educators (SACE) and students assessed on academic performance. The school management board (SGB) helps to involve parents but does not have supervisory tools to ensure active involvement (interviewees 1 and 3).

One participant remarked, *"Our efforts go unnoticed because parents are not held accountable like we are. We need a system that reminds them they play a role too"* (P1). Another said, *"Parents do not come to meetings because they think it's just our job. But when we speak to them one-on-one, they realise they matter"* (P3).

Schools have suggested formalising parental obligations through systematic monitoring systems to remedy this situation. Parents may be required to attend several school meetings annually, regularly approve courses, and participate in frequent feedback sessions (Yulianti, Denessen & Droop, 2018). This is consistent with Rotter's social learning theory, which states that reinforcing desired actions through organised effort can lead to superior outcomes.

Strengthening communication strategies

Teachers proposed increasing communication options beyond established means by adopting the use of social media platforms such as WhatsApp, Facebook, local media, and other local community groups, which are useful methods for parental participation (Mawela et al., 2017). However, researchers warn that many government institutions underuse these platforms, relying on them only for one-way communication rather than participating in debates. To increase engagement, schools should encourage two-way communication and offer parents digital literacy training as needed. Collaborating with local community leaders and religious institutions can also help develop an engaged culture. Particularly, traditional leaders in rural regions influence community members and can help support parental involvement in schools (Mncube & Madikizela-Madiya, 2014). Consequently, integrating traditional leaders into school events could help bridge cultural boundaries and increase parental involvement.

7

Central European Journal of Educational Research 7(1) 2025. 24–31.

Teacher-led initiatives for improving parental involvement

Teachers proposed various organised strategies, such as parenting workshops, mentoring programs, and policies promoting family involvement. Along with regular seminars that can educate parents about their role in their children's education and provide practical assistance in their studies. Certainly, such initiatives must be designed to address the unique issues facing rural parents while ensuring accessibility and relevance (Latif et al., 2021). Moreover, academic camps and weekend study sessions should be offered as extracurricular activities. Correspondingly, these activities allow parents to participate informally in their children's education while providing additional learning assistance. Schools should build resource centres to provide tutoring and support services to parents and students (Medarić, 2020).

Recommendation

To effectively increase parental involvement in schools, a systematic reward system must be implemented to shape parental behaviour through expectations, social reinforcement, and perceived control. Schools should create systematic monitoring mechanisms to measure parent participation and provide regular feedback and reinforcement. The following steps can help achieve effective parental involvement:

Short term actionable steps
- Implement parent workshops on educational policies, homework support, and communication.
- Assign a "parent liaison officer" at each school to monitor engagement.
- Encourage teacher-parent WhatsApp groups for real-time updates.
- Host community events featuring traditional leaders to promote school involvement

Long term policy reforms
- Create monitoring tools for SGBs to assess parental engagement systematically.
- Fund community resource centres with internet access and educational materials.
- Include parental involvement metrics in district-level school performance evaluations.
- Train teachers to apply culturally responsive engagement strategies.

Conclusion

This study foregrounds the impact of teacher-driven strategies on increasing parental participation in rural education. Therefore, teachers noted significant barriers such as financial limitations, lack of accountability and communication difficulties. For this reason, rural schools can increase collaboration between parents and teachers by establishing organised efforts such as parent workshops, accountability measures, and better communication strategies. The combination of traditional leaders and community-based techniques improves engagement by ensuring that cultural norms and societal expectations are aligned with educational goals. Subsequently, future studies should examine the long-term effects of these strategies and how they work in different rural contexts. Finally, bridging the gap between parents and schools through proactive teacher-driven strategies is critical to improving learner outcomes and strengthening rural education systems. It is also worth noting that rural communities in South Africa are not homogeneous. What works in one specific situation may not apply to everyone else. Furthermore, the findings are based on a single case study with 10 participants and should not be generalised to other rural schools. Instead, they should be seen as context-rich insights that can inform future practices and policies.

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