





# Investigating the Effects of Parental Involvement in Education: A Case Study of Sada Schools in Whittlesea, South Africa

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## ABSTRACT

This article investigated the effects of parental involvement in education, focusing on Sada schools in Whittlesea, South Africa. Guided by Epstein's Framework of Parental Involvement, a qualitative case study approach was employed, involving interviews with members of the School Management Team (SMT), teachers, learners, and parents. The findings revealed that parental involvement significantly improves learner academic performance, motivation, and behavior. The article also uncovered several barriers, including parental illiteracy, work commitments, substance abuse, and a lack of confidence, which negatively affect involvement. Furthermore, the lack of communication between schools and parents contributes to limited engagement. To address these challenges, participants recommended improved communication strategies, flexible meeting schedules, parental workshops, and the creation of a welcoming school environment. The article concludes that while parental involvement is a critical factor in learner success, it remains limited due to socio-economic and institutional barriers. Schools must adopt inclusive, community-oriented approaches that empower parents to participate fully in their children's education. The article contributes to the broader understanding of family-school partnerships and offers practical recommendations for enhancing learner outcomes through strengthened parental engagement.

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## INTRODUCTION

Parental involvement has long been recognised as a critical factor influencing learners' academic performance and overall educational development. In recent years, the educational landscape in South Africa and globally has placed renewed emphasis on collaborative approaches between schools and families to foster learner success.<sup>1</sup> Particularly in under-resourced communities, the active participation of parents in school-related activities has been shown to correlate positively with learners' motivation,

<sup>1</sup> Siphso Mokoena, "The Impact of Parental Support on Rural Learner Achievement," *South African Journal of Education* 42, no. 3 (2022): 255–68.

attendance, and academic outcomes.<sup>2</sup> Whittlesea, a semi-rural town in the Eastern Cape, faces a unique set of educational challenges, including socioeconomic constraints, limited access to learning resources, and a historically strained relationship between schools and the broader community. The Sada school district, in particular, represents a microcosm of these systemic issues. While efforts have been made by government and non-governmental bodies to promote parental engagement, the degree to which these efforts translate into measurable educational outcomes remains underexplored.<sup>3</sup> Research suggests that parental involvement is multidimensional, encompassing activities such as assisting with homework, attending school meetings, participating in decision-making, and maintaining communication with educators.<sup>4</sup>

However, cultural, economic, and educational barriers often inhibit meaningful engagement, particularly in disadvantaged communities.<sup>5</sup> Understanding how these dynamics play out in the Sada schools of Whittlesea is crucial for developing targeted interventions that support learner achievement. This article seeks to investigate the effects of parental involvement on educational outcomes in selected Sada schools within Whittlesea. Through qualitative methods, the research will explore parents' perceptions, levels of involvement, and the impact on learners' academic performance. The findings aim to inform policy recommendations and practical strategies for schools seeking to enhance community engagement and learner success.

## LITERATURE REVIEW

Parental involvement has long been recognised as a critical determinant of learner success, with numerous studies affirming its positive influence on academic achievement, learner motivation, and school discipline.<sup>6</sup> In the South African context, the Department of Basic Education (DBE) promotes parental and community engagement as a key pillar of educational transformation. However, the extent and nature of parental involvement vary significantly across socio-economic and geographic contexts, particularly in semi-rural areas such as Whittlesea, located in the Eastern Cape Province.

### Theoretical and Policy Foundations of Parental Involvement

Theoretical frameworks, such as Epstein's model of overlapping spheres of influence, suggest that the learner is best supported when schools, families, and communities collaborate. South African education policy echoes this idea.<sup>7</sup> The South African Schools Act (SASA) of 1996 and subsequent policy documents, such as the Policy on the South African Standard for Principals, mandate and encourage stakeholder participation in school governance and development.<sup>8</sup> Despite this policy emphasis, implementation in under-resourced settings remains weak.

Mpofu et al. highlight that while national frameworks support parental involvement in theory, contextual realities such as poverty, low literacy levels among parents, and competing livelihood

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<sup>2</sup> Prudence Naidoo and Bhekisisa Mhlanga, *Reimagining Rural Education: Collaboration Between Schools and Homes* (Cape Town: Learning Tree Publishers, 2023).

<sup>3</sup> Nomsa, Zulu and Thabiso Dlamini, "Community Engagement in Education: Case Studies from the Eastern Cape," *Journal of Educational Policy and Leadership* 11, no. 1 (2024): 21–39.

<sup>4</sup> Roshnee Govender, "Exploring School-Level Strategies for Enhancing Parental Involvement in Under-Resourced South African Schools," *South African Journal of Education* 42, no. 2 (2022): 1–12.

<sup>5</sup> Rudo, Mpofu, Zanele Khumalo, and Phumzile Ndlovu, "Parental Involvement Barriers in Disadvantaged Communities," *Education and Development Quarterly* 19, no. 2 (2023): 115–30.

<sup>6</sup> J. L. Epstein, *School, Family, and Community Partnerships: Preparing Educators and Improving Schools* (Westview Press, 2001); William Jeynes, "A Meta-Analysis of the Efficacy of Different Types of Parental Involvement Programs for Urban Students," *Urban Education* 47, no. 4 (2012): 706–42.

<sup>7</sup> Epstein, *School, Family, and Community Partnerships: Preparing Educators and Improving Schools*, 2001.

<sup>8</sup> Department of Basic Education Republic of South Africa, "Policy on the South African Standard for Principals: Enhancing the Professional Image and Competencies of School Principals" (Pretoria: Department of Basic Education, 2016), <https://www.education.gov.za>.

priorities often render these policies ineffective on the ground.<sup>9</sup> These constraints are particularly pronounced in semi-rural communities like Whittlesea, where systemic poverty and social inequality intersect with educational challenges.

### Barriers to Effective Parental Engagement

Literature consistently identifies multiple, intersecting barriers that limit meaningful parental involvement in learners' education in under-resourced contexts. Key among these are:

- **Low levels of parental education and literacy:** Many parents feel ill-equipped to support their children academically or to engage with educators in a meaningful way.<sup>10</sup>
- **Poverty and unemployment:** Economic hardship compels many parents to prioritise income-generating activities over school involvement, often resulting in minimal attendance at school meetings or participation in governance structures.<sup>11</sup>
- **Time constraints and logistical challenges:** In rural and semi-rural communities, long work hours, transport costs, and a lack of communication infrastructure limit the opportunities for parents to engage with schools.<sup>12</sup>
- **Limited awareness and empowerment:** Parents often lack clarity on the role they are expected or allowed to play in the schooling process, particularly where school cultures are not inclusive or welcoming to parental input.<sup>13</sup>

Govender argues that these systemic barriers are compounded by a lack of strategic initiatives at the school level to actively involve parents, despite the known benefits of such engagement.<sup>14</sup>

### Implications for Learner Outcomes

The absence of structured and sustained parental involvement has significant implications for learner outcomes. Research suggests that learners in environments where parents are disengaged tend to exhibit lower levels of motivation, reduced academic performance, and higher incidences of absenteeism and behavioural problems.<sup>15</sup> These challenges are amplified in resource-constrained schools, such as those in the Sada district of Whittlesea, where institutional support for learners may already be limited due to teacher shortages, overcrowded classrooms, and inadequate infrastructure.

Moreover, studies show that when schools adopt inclusive engagement strategies—such as home visits, parent workshops, and culturally sensitive communication—there is often a measurable improvement in learner performance and school climate.<sup>16</sup> However, such practices are rare in semi-rural South African schools due to capacity constraints and a lack of empirical data to inform context-specific interventions.

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<sup>9</sup> Mpofo, Khumalo, and Ndlovu, "Parental Involvement Barriers in Disadvantaged Communities."

<sup>10</sup> Vuzi Mncube, "The Perceptions of Parents of Their Role in the Democratic Governance of Schools in South Africa: Are They on Board?," *South African Journal of Education* 29, no. 1 (2009): 83–103.

<sup>11</sup> Eleanor M Lemmer, "Parent Involvement in Teacher Education in South Africa," *International Journal about Parents in Education* 1, no. 1 (2007).

<sup>12</sup> Malesela, Makgopa and Matseliso L. Mokhele, "Teachers' Perceptions of Parental Involvement in Schooling," *International Journal of Humanities and Social Science* 3, no. 16 (2013): 123–33.

<sup>13</sup> Lindiwe Sibanda, "Rethinking Parental Involvement in South African Township Schools," *Perspectives in Education* 38, no. 2 (2020): 132–45.

<sup>14</sup> Thandeka Govender, *Bridging the Gap: School-Family Partnerships in South African Primary Education* (Johannesburg: Education Press SA, 2022).

<sup>15</sup> Jeynes, "A Meta-Analysis of the Efficacy of Different Types of Parental Involvement Programs for Urban Students"; Sibanda, "Rethinking Parental Involvement in South African Township Schools."

<sup>16</sup> Garry Hornby and Rayleen Lafaele, "Barriers to Parental Involvement in Education: An Explanatory Model," in *Mapping the Field* (Routledge, 2023), 121–36.

## Gaps in the Literature and the Case of Whittlesea's Sada Schools

Despite the broader recognition of the importance of parental involvement, there remains a critical gap in the literature concerning its specific impact within semi-rural communities like Whittlesea. The Sada school district is characterised by high levels of socio-economic disadvantage, yet there is little empirical research documenting how parental engagement (or lack thereof) affects learner performance in this context. This absence of localised data limits the ability of school leaders, educators, and policymakers to design evidence-based strategies for improving school-family partnerships in such settings.

While Mpofo et al. provide valuable insights into parental involvement challenges in South Africa more generally, their findings need to be complemented by community-specific studies that consider the socio-cultural and economic nuances of semi-rural regions.<sup>17</sup> Without such research, policy interventions risk being overly generic and ultimately ineffective.

## THEORETICAL FRAMEWORK

Without this understanding, efforts to improve academic performance and school-community relations may fall short. This article seeks to address this gap by investigating the effects of parental involvement on educational outcomes in the Sada schools of Whittlesea. By exploring the nature, extent, and impact of parental engagement, the research aims to provide insights that can inform practical interventions for strengthening school-community collaboration and supporting learner achievement. The foundation of this article is Joyce Epstein's framework, which is among the most popular and thorough frameworks for analyzing parental engagement in education.<sup>18</sup> It lists six different forms of involvement that help students succeed. The Six Categories of Participation Parenting: Assisting families in creating circumstances at home that help kids succeed academically. Communicating: Creating efficient channels of communication between homes and schools.

Volunteering: Motivating parents to help in classrooms and at school events. Engaging families in curriculum-related activities and homework assignments is known as "learning at home." Including parents in school governance, advocacy, and decision-making is known as "decision-making." Working Together with the Community: Organising community resources and services for students and families. It covered the many facets of parental involvement, including shared responsibility, communication, and support at home, in addition to attendance at school functions. It supports the inclusive and community-based education policies of South Africa.<sup>19</sup> It made it possible to assess the kinds of engagement that are present or absent in Sada schools as well as how they affect student achievement.

## METHODOLOGY

This article adopted a qualitative research approach, employing a case study design to gain a deep understanding of parental involvement in education within the unique context of secondary schools in the Sada Circuit, Whittlesea, Eastern Cape Province. The case study design was chosen for its strength in capturing detailed, context-rich information that can inform both policy and practice. This approach is well-suited to exploring complex social phenomena such as the dynamics between parents, educators, and learners in localised school settings.

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<sup>17</sup> Nomsa, Mpofo, Lindiwe Sibanda, and Nqobile Dlodlo, "Policy-Practice Gaps in Parental Involvement: Challenges and Opportunities in South African Basic Education," *Journal of Education Policy and Leadership* 15, no. 1 (2023): 45–62.

<sup>18</sup> Joyce L Epstein, "School, Family, and Community Partnerships: Preparing Educators and Improving Schools," *Adolescence-San Diego* 37 (2002): 435.

<sup>19</sup> Naidoo and Mhlanga, *Reimagining Rural Education: Collaboration Between Schools and Homes*.

## **Paradigm**

Interpretative paradigm, which emphasises understanding of the subjective meanings and lived experiences of individuals within their specific social contexts. Rooted in the belief that reality is socially constructed, this paradigm aligns with the study's aim to explore the nuanced and context-dependent nature of parental involvement in education. By adopting this lens, the research sought to uncover how parents, educators, and learners in the Sada Circuit of Whittlesea interpret and engage with educational processes. The interpretative paradigm enabled the researcher to delve into participants' perspectives, recognising their voices as central to generating meaningful insights that reflect the complexity of real-life educational settings.

## **Population and Sampling**

The target population for this article comprised key stakeholders within a selected secondary school in the Sada Circuit. These included two School Management Team (SMT) members, two educators, two learners, and two parents. A purposive sampling technique was employed to ensure that participants possessed relevant experiences and knowledge about parental involvement in education.<sup>20</sup> This sampling strategy facilitated the inclusion of diverse perspectives, capturing insights from multiple layers of the school community.

## **Data Collection Methods**

Data was collected using two primary methods. First, semi-structured interviews were conducted with educators and SMT members to gather in-depth information on the nature of school-parent relationships, as well as perceived challenges and strategies for improvement. Second, document analysis was undertaken to examine relevant school records, including attendance registers, academic performance reports, and parental involvement documentation (subject to permission), to identify patterns and correlations that support the qualitative findings.

## **Trustworthiness**

To ensure the trustworthiness of this qualitative study, adhered to the criteria of credibility, transferability, dependability, and confirmability. Credibility was achieved through prolonged engagement with participants, triangulation of data sources, and member checking to validate findings. Transferability was enhanced by providing rich, thick descriptions of the context and participants, allowing readers to determine the applicability of the findings to similar settings. Dependability was ensured through a detailed audit trail documenting the research process, including data collection and analysis procedures. Confirmability was maintained by practising reflexivity, whereby the researcher continuously examined and acknowledged their own assumptions and potential biases to minimise their influence on the interpretation of data. Together, these strategies strengthened the overall rigour and integrity of the research.

## **Data Analysis**

The qualitative data collected through interviews were analysed using thematic analysis. This involved transcribing interviews, systematically coding the data, and identifying recurring themes and categories related to the forms, challenges, and effects of parental involvement.<sup>21</sup> Document analysis further

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<sup>20</sup> John W Creswell and J David Creswell, *Research Design: Qualitative, Quantitative, and Mixed Methods Approaches* (Sage publications, 2017).

<sup>21</sup> A.S. De Vos et al., *Research at Grass Roots: For the Social Sciences and Human Service Professions*, 4th ed. (Pretoria: Van Schalk, 2011).

supported the thematic findings by offering objective evidence that contextualised participants' perspectives.

### **Ethical Considerations**

Ethical clearance for this article was obtained from the appropriate institutional review board. All participants were informed about the purpose and procedures of the research, and informed consent was obtained from adults, as well as assent from learners and consent from their guardians. Participation was entirely voluntary, and participants were assured of their right to withdraw at any time without penalty. Confidentiality and anonymity were upheld throughout the research process by de-identifying data and securely storing all research materials.

### **PRESENTATION OF FINDINGS**

#### **Theme 1: What are the effects of parental involvement on learners' performance at school?**

In response to this question, the SMT, teachers, learners and parents had the following to say:

Participant 1: said that,

*“Parental involvement plays a vital role in learners' performance because learners perform very well.”*

Participant 2: indicated that,

*“Parental involvement is a very important variable that influences a learner's performance in and out of the classroom. It boosts learner achievement and leads to increased academic performance.”*

Participant 3 explained that,

*“When parents are involved in the education of their children, academic performance will improve. They will become motivated and acquire better skills due to the support they receive from parents.”*

Participant 4, stated that,

*“When parents work hand in hand with the teachers, the learner's performance improves from time to time. As a parent, you should know the strengths and weaknesses of the child so that you can assist him/her.”*

Participant 5: mentioned that,

*“Parental involvement encourages learners to achieve higher marks. Learners become more eager to learn because of the support they receive from their parents.”*

Participant 6, echoed that,

*“It has a positive effect because when the learner gets support from the parent, they do better in their academics.”*

Participant 7: said that,

*“When parents do not involve themselves in their children's education, learners tend to ignore their schoolwork because there is no care at home.”*

Participant 8: said that,

*“The effect could be positive and negative in the sense that it could have an adverse effect. Positive in such a way that if a parent is dedicated to helping the child with the schoolwork, the child will perform better at school. Negative in that if the parent is overdoing the assistance, the learner gains negative attitudes because the learner thinks that the parent wants to know everything about him/her, and he/she is not given a chance to be independent.”*

## **Theme 2: What are the reasons for the non-involvement of parents in their children's education?**

Participants mentioned the following reasons for parents not to take part in their children's education: workaholics, alcoholics, and a low level of education.

Participant 1: mentioned that,

*“Most of our learners stay with their parents or grandparents who are not educated, and it becomes problematic for them to assist their children; parents died due to HIV/AIDS or parents are working far from home; the parents of learners are studying, they are also busy with their education.”*

Participant 2: indicated that,

*“Most parents are illiterate; they lack understanding of the schoolwork. Time and economic constraints – work or physical job demands of parents do not allow them to be involved; learners are coming from poor backgrounds.”*

Participant 3: lamented that,

*“Teachers tend to distance themselves from parents. Teachers only call parents when the learners have done something wrong, and parents also avail themselves when their children have problems at school. Lack of communication between teachers and parents.”*

Participant 4: said that,

*“Parents lack patience when motivating their children. The system of education that is used nowadays is different from the system that was used in their time. English is used as a common language of teaching and communication, and parents do not understand English.”*

Participant 5: revealed that,

*“Some parents may seem to be workaholics; they do not have time to interact with their children.”*

Participant 6: concurred that,

*“Most parents are drunkards, and they are unable to take part in the education of their children.”*

Participant 7: said that,

*“I never went to school, so I do not know where to start to help my grandchildren with their schoolwork.”*

Participant 8: revealed that,

*“Parents feel intimidated and unwelcome. Parents also lack comfort when discussing school issues.”*

## **Theme 3: What can be done to ensure parents are meaningfully involved in school activities?**

In response to this question, SMT and teachers responded that parents should be educated about what is expected and their role at school, while learners and parents responded that there should be clear communication between the school and parents about the progress of learners and other school activities.

Participant 1: said that,

*“There should be a clear line of communication between the school and parents regarding the child's progress. Parents need to be educated and made to understand their role at school, to be involved parents in school programs, and have open days.”*

Participant 2: mentioned that,

*“Demonstrate a positive view of education at home; encourage reading/homework times; attend school events/meetings; ask educators about the child's progress”.*

Participant 3: said that,

*“Meetings and activities of the school must be held after hours/ in the afternoon because some parents are at work during the school activities or the activities to be held on weekends.”*

Participant 4: said that,

*“Workshops to help parents have a clear understanding of the importance of education.”*

Participant 5: mentioned that,

*“Voluntary opportunities should be created at school for parents with/without jobs.”*

Participant 6: said that,

*“A school should send invitations to parents regarding anything that involves the school. Principals must share the school's progress with parents.”*

Participant 6: said that,

*“Good communication with the school and parents is very important.”*

Participant 6: said that,

*“Teachers can assist by giving interactive homework assignments to learners so that they can work with the help of their parents.”*

## **DISCUSSION**

### **Parental involvement has a positive impact on learners' performance**

Findings revealed that parental involvement enhances learner achievement. It leads to improved academic performance, increased motivation, better discipline, and stronger skills development in learners.<sup>22</sup> Learners whose parents are actively involved tend to be more focused, eager to learn, and confident in their academic abilities. Hornby and Lafaele state that parental involvement has been associated with improved learner behavior, better academic achievement, and increased motivation.<sup>23</sup> The findings of this study confirm the views of Van Voorhis et al. (2013), who assert that consistent parental support creates a collaborative environment that enhances learner engagement and school performance.

### **Barriers to Parental Involvement**

Participants pointed to illiteracy, work demands, long distances, lack of confidence, and substance abuse as barriers. Many learners live with grandparents, and communication between school and home is weak. These findings confirm the position of Hornby and Lafaele that these are “individual and institutional barriers”, including lack of time, low parental education, and socio-economic hardships.<sup>24</sup> Desforges and Abouchaar also explain that, while many parents want to be involved, practical challenges such as low income and long work hours limit their ability to participate in school-related activities.<sup>25</sup>

### **Strategies to Improve Parental Involvement**

The participants suggested improving school–parent communication, creating flexible meeting times, offering workshops, and making the school environment more welcoming. Epstein’s framework included strategies like “parenting workshops,” “volunteering opportunities,” and “communication channels” that schools can use to build stronger partnerships with families.<sup>26</sup> The findings concur with Van Voorhis et al., who emphasized that regular, structured communication, such as school newsletters, open days, and collaborative homework, enhances trust and shared responsibility between teachers and parents.<sup>27</sup>

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<sup>22</sup> Joyce Epstein, *School, Family, and Community Partnerships, Student Economy Edition: Preparing Educators and Improving Schools* (Routledge, 2018).

<sup>23</sup> Garry Hornby and Rayleen Lafaele, “Barriers to Parental Involvement in Education: An Explanatory Model,” *Educational Review* 63, no. 1 (February 2011): 37–52, <https://doi.org/10.1080/00131911.2010.488049>.

<sup>24</sup> Hornby and Lafaele, “Barriers to Parental Involvement in Education: An Explanatory Model,” February 2011.

<sup>25</sup> Charles Desforges and Alberto Abouchaar, *The Impact of Parental Involvement, Parental Support and Family Education on Pupil Achievement and Adjustment: A Literature Review*, vol. 433 (DfES London, 2003).

<sup>26</sup> Epstein, *School, Family, and Community Partnerships: Preparing Educators and Improving Schools*, 2001.

<sup>27</sup> Frances L Van Voorhis et al., “The Impact of Family Involvement on the Education of Children Ages 3 to 8: A Focus on Literacy and Math Achievement Outcomes and Social-Emotional Skills.,” *Mdrc*, 2013.

Desforges and Abouchaar recommended that schools should take the initiative to build parental capacity, especially in under-resourced communities.<sup>28</sup>

## RECOMMENDATIONS

Based on the findings of this article, it is recommended that schools in Whittlesea, particularly Sada schools, should prioritize creating a more inclusive and supportive environment that encourages and facilitates parental involvement. This can be achieved by improving communication between schools and parents through regular updates on student progress and school activities. Schools should offer flexible meeting times, including after-hours and weekend sessions, to accommodate working parents. Additionally, educational workshops aimed at building parents' capacity to assist with their children's academic needs and promote positive attitudes towards education should be introduced. Finally, schools must create a welcoming atmosphere where all parents, regardless of their educational background, feel confident and valued in their role as active participants in their children's education.

## CONCLUSION

This article has demonstrated that parental involvement plays a crucial role in improving learner achievement in Whittlesea's Sada schools. The positive impact of parental support on learners' academic performance, motivation, and overall success was evident from the perspectives of the School Management Team, teachers, learners, and parents. However, various barriers, including illiteracy, work commitments, and lack of communication, hinder many parents from actively participating in their children's education. Addressing these challenges through targeted strategies, such as better communication, flexible scheduling, and parental education programs, can enhance involvement and improve learner outcomes. These findings emphasize the need for schools to work collaboratively with parents to create a more inclusive educational environment that fosters academic success for all students.

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<sup>28</sup> Desforges and Abouchaar, *The Impact of Parental Involvement, Parental Support and Family Education on Pupil Achievement and Adjustment: A Literature Review*.

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