

International Journal Research Publication Analysis

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THE CHALLENGES OF COMMUNITY ENGAGEMENT IN ENHANCING ACADEMIC PERFORMANCE IN RURAL PUBLIC SECONDARY SCHOOLS: EVIDENCE FROM TUNDURU DISTRICT COUNCIL, TANZANIA

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Article Received: 30 August 2026

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Article Revised: 19 September 2026

Department of Education, University of Iringa, Tanzania.

Published on: 09 October 2026

DOI: <https://doi-doi.org/101555/ijrpa.2615>

ABSTRACT

Community engagement is increasingly recognised as an important component of improving students' academic performance. The engagement creates opportunities for parents, teachers, school leaders and other community stakeholders to collaborate in supporting teaching and learning. However, effective community engagement remains difficult in many rural public secondary schools in Tanzania. This study examined the challenges of community engagement in enhancing academic performance in rural public secondary schools. It employed a mixed-methods approach involving 195 respondents drawn from four public secondary schools: (Frank Weston, Mataka, Matemanga and Mgomba). Data were collected using questionnaires survey, interviews and documentary review. The collected data were analysed using descriptive statistics and thematic analysis. The findings indicated generally low levels of parental participation in key educational activities. Only 6.7% of respondents indicated that parents supervised students' learning at home, while 6.0% reported regular communication between parents and teachers. Attendance at school meetings was comparatively higher at 31.3%, although substantial differences existed among schools: 47.1% at Frank Weston, 25.0% at Mataka, 44.4% at Matemanga and 12.5% at Mgomba. Homework checking was also limited, with Mataka recording the highest participation at 15.0%. These patterns demonstrate key engagement challenges, particularly weak parent-teacher communication, limited home-based supervision, low homework monitoring and uneven participation in school meetings. The study concludes that strengthening school-community partnerships is necessary for improving academic support in rural secondary

schools. It recommends strengthening parent-teacher communication, increasing community awareness, establishing regular and flexible school-community engagement mechanisms and equipping parents with practical knowledge for supporting students' learning at home.

KEYWORDS: *Community engagement, parental involvement, academic performance, rural secondary schools, Tanzania.*

1. INTRODUCTION

1.1 Background to the Study

Education is a fundamental component of social and economic development because it equips individuals with knowledge, skills and competencies necessary for personal development and participation in society (UNESCO, 2020). Academic performance is therefore an important indicator of educational effectiveness. Although academic achievement is influenced by several factors within and outside schools, the involvement of parents and communities in students' education has increasingly received attention as an important factor supporting effective teaching and learning (Epstein, 2011; Sheldon & Epstein, 2005).

Community engagement in education refers to the active participation and collaboration of parents, community members, teachers, school leaders, local government authorities and other stakeholders in activities intended to support students' learning and school development (Epstein, 2011; Osei-Owusu & Sam, 2012). Such engagement may involve attending school meetings, communicating with teachers, monitoring students' attendance, supervising homework, participating in school decision-making and providing material or financial support (Epstein, 2011; Nyembeke, 2016).

The importance of school-family-community partnerships has been highlighted in international education research. Sheldon and Epstein (2005), for example, found that school practices that encouraged families to support children's learning at home were associated with improved mathematics achievement. Their findings suggest that community and family involvement can contribute to academic outcomes when engagement activities are deliberately organised and linked to students' learning needs.

In Tanzania, the importance of stakeholder participation in education is also reflected in national education policy. The Education and Training Policy, 2014, 2023 Edition provides the current policy framework for education and training in Tanzania and emphasises the participation of different stakeholders in the provision and improvement of education.

Evidence further demonstrates the relationship between parental involvement and students' academic outcomes. Mwakililo and Mgaya (2021), in a study of community secondary schools in Mbeya City, found a strong positive relationship between parental involvement in school affairs and students' academic achievement. The study involved 475 respondents and concluded that students whose parents were more involved in their education had greater opportunities to improve their academic achievement.

However, the existence of a positive relationship does not necessarily mean that communities are able to participate effectively. In many rural areas, parents may experience economic, social, geographical and educational barriers that limit their participation in school activities. Nyembeke (2016), for instance, reported that 67% of parents in the studied Tanzanian community secondary schools were not effectively involved in students' academic activities, including homework guidance, checking students' daily work, monitoring attendance and communicating with teachers.

Similarly, research on community engagement in Tanzania has identified low community awareness of academic matters, communication problems between schools and communities and inadequate information about school agendas as challenges affecting participation. Other research conducted in Kilosa District identified poverty, low educational levels, political interference and top-down decision-making as factors limiting effective community participation in secondary school management.

These challenges are particularly important in rural communities where schools may be geographically distant from households and where parents may have demanding economic responsibilities. Although previous studies have examined parental participation and school-community relationships in different parts of Tanzania, there remains a need for location-specific evidence concerning the practical challenges that affect community engagement in rural public secondary schools in Tunduru District Council.

1.2 Statement of the Problem

Community engagement is expected to support students' academic development through parental supervision, communication with teachers, attendance at school meetings, monitoring of homework and participation in school decision-making. Nevertheless, the expected level of engagement may not always be achieved in rural public secondary schools.

Previous Tanzanian studies have demonstrated that parental involvement can positively influence students' academic achievement, but they have also identified limited parental participation, poor communication, inadequate awareness and socioeconomic constraints as barriers to effective engagement.

The situation raises concern about whether parents and other community members in rural areas are sufficiently engaged in activities that directly support students' learning. In Tunduru District Council, limited evidence is available on the extent to which parents participate in learning-related activities and the challenges associated with such participation. Without adequate community engagement, schools may face difficulties in monitoring students' learning outside the classroom, communicating students' academic needs to parents and mobilising community support for educational improvement.

Therefore, this study examined the challenges of community engagement in enhancing academic performance in rural public secondary schools in Tunduru District Council, Tanzania.

The study provides empirical information that may assist school administrators, teachers, parents, local government education officers and policymakers to understand barriers to effective community engagement in rural secondary education.

2. METHODOLOGY

2.1 Study Area

The study was conducted in Tunduru District Council in Ruvuma Region, Tanzania. The study focused on selected rural public secondary schools because rural schools provide an important context for examining community engagement, particularly where geographical, socioeconomic and institutional conditions may influence parental participation in education. Four secondary schools were involved in the study: Frank Weston, Mataka, Matemanga and Mgomba Secondary Schools. Figure 1 indicates the location of the study area.

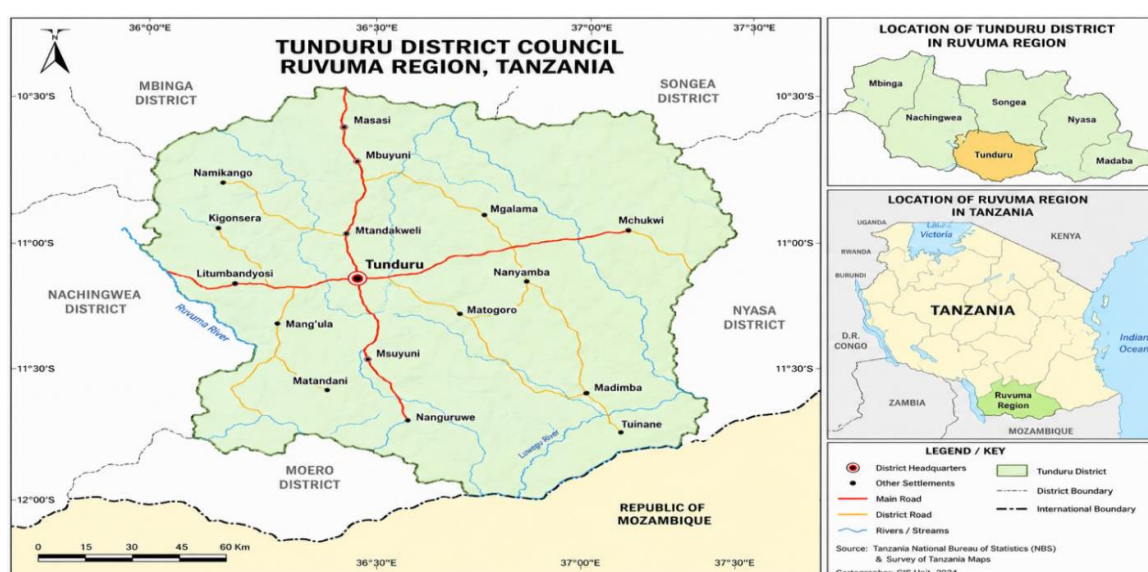


Figure 1: Map of Tunduru District.

2.2 Research Approach and Design

The study employed a mixed-methods research approach. Quantitative methods were used to obtain measurable information concerning the participation of parents and communities in students' learning activities, while qualitative methods were used to obtain explanations concerning challenges affecting community engagement.

A cross-sectional research design was employed because data were collected from respondents at one point in time. The design was appropriate because it enabled the researcher to examine the existing situation of community engagement in the selected schools.

2.3 Population, Sampling and Sample Size

The study involved 195 respondents from the four selected secondary schools. Respondents were selected to provide information concerning school-community relationships and parental participation in students' academic activities.

Purposive sampling was used to select key informants with relevant knowledge of school-community engagement, while appropriate probability sampling procedures were used to select other respondents. The final sample consisted of 195 respondents.

2.4 Data Collection Methods

Data were collected using questionnaires, interviews and documentary review. Questionnaires were used to collect quantitative information from respondents concerning parents' participation in learning activities, attendance at school meetings, communication with teachers and supervision of students' learning. Interviews were conducted with selected key informants to obtain detailed explanations regarding challenges affecting community engagement. Documentary review was used to obtain supplementary information from relevant school records and educational documents.

2.5 Data Analysis

Quantitative data were coded, entered and analysed using descriptive statistical procedures. Frequencies and percentages were used to summarise respondents' responses. The findings were presented using tables and narrative descriptions.

Qualitative information obtained from interviews was organised into themes. Thematic analysis was used to identify common challenges affecting community engagement and to interpret respondents' explanations.

2.6 Ethical Considerations

Ethical principles were observed throughout the research process. Respondents were informed about the purpose of the study and their participation was voluntary. Confidentiality

and anonymity were maintained by avoiding the disclosure of respondents' names in the research report. Information collected from respondents was used strictly for academic purposes.

3. RESULTS

3.1 Parents' Supervision of Students' Learning at Home

The findings indicated that parents' supervision of students' learning at home was generally low. Overall, only 6.7% of respondents reported that parents regularly supervised students' learning at home.

This finding indicates that most parents were not consistently involved in monitoring students' academic activities outside school. Limited supervision may reduce opportunities for parents to identify students' learning difficulties and encourage regular study.

3.2 Parents' Attendance at School Meetings

Parents' attendance at school meetings was higher than the other measured forms of engagement. Overall, 31.3% of respondents reported regular parental attendance; however, participation varied substantially across the four schools, as shown in Table 1.

Table 1 presents the proportion of respondents reporting regular parental attendance at school meetings in each selected school.

As shown in Table 1, Frank Weston recorded the highest reported parental attendance at school meetings (47.1%), followed by Matemanga (44.4%) and Mataka (25.0%), while Mgomba recorded the lowest level (12.5%).

Table 1: Parents Regularly Attending School Meetings by School.

School	Parents attending school meetings regularly (%)
Frank Weston	47.1
Mataka	25.0
Matemanga	44.4
Mgomba	12.5
Overall	31.3

The wide variation across schools indicates that community engagement was not uniform and constitutes an important school-level challenge requiring context-sensitive responses.

The variation suggests that community engagement was not uniform across the selected schools.

3.3 Communication Between Parents and Teachers

The findings showed that communication between parents and teachers concerning students' academic development was very limited. Only 6.0% of respondents reported regular communication between parents and teachers.

The low percentage indicates that many parents had limited direct interaction with teachers concerning students' academic progress, challenges and learning needs.

3.4 Parents' Involvement in Homework Checking

The findings also showed limited parental participation in checking students' homework. Among the reported school-level findings, Mataka recorded the highest level of homework-checking participation at 15.0%.

3.5 Challenges of Community Engagement Identified in the Results

The results identify four directly observed challenges to effective community engagement: very limited parental supervision of learning at home (6.7%), very low regular parent-teacher communication (6.0%), low and uneven attendance at school meetings (31.3% overall, ranging from 12.5% to 47.1% across schools), and limited parental monitoring of homework, with the highest reported school-level participation being only 15.0%. Taken together, these findings show that the central challenge is not simply whether communities are present in school affairs, but whether engagement extends consistently to activities that directly support students' learning at home and strengthen communication between families and schools.

As shown in Table 2, participation was relatively stronger in attending school meetings than in direct learning-support activities such as home supervision, homework checking and parent-teacher communication. This pattern reinforces the finding that sustained learning-focused engagement remains a central challenge in the selected rural schools.

4. DISCUSSION

Table 2 summarises the major community-engagement indicators and shows that participation was strongest in school-meeting attendance but remained low in activities directly connected with day-to-day learning support.

The overall findings can be summarised as follows:

Table 2: Summary of Major Community Engagement Findings.

Community engagement indicator	Overall reported participation
Parents supervising learning at home	6.7%
Parents communicating with teachers	6.0%
Parents attending school meetings	31.3%
Homework checking	Generally low; highest reported school-level participation was 15.0%

The findings demonstrate that participation was relatively stronger in attending school meetings than in direct learning-support activities such as home supervision, homework checking and parent-teacher communication.

4. DISCUSSION

4.1 Limited Parental Supervision of Learning at Home

The finding that only 6.7% of respondents reported regular parental supervision of learning at home demonstrates a major challenge to community engagement. Parents play an important role in creating supportive learning environments outside school. When parents monitor students' study routines, homework and attendance, they can identify learning problems early and communicate them to teachers.

The finding is consistent with Nyembeke (2016), who reported that a substantial proportion of parents in Tanzanian community secondary schools were not effectively involved in academic activities such as guiding students in homework, checking students' daily work and monitoring attendance.

The finding may partly be explained by the socioeconomic circumstances of rural households. Parents who spend considerable time in agricultural and other income-generating activities may have limited time to supervise students' learning. In addition, some parents may lack confidence or educational knowledge required to support secondary school subjects.

4.2 Low Parent-Teacher Communication

The study found that only 6.0% of respondents reported regular communication between parents and teachers. This represents an important barrier because effective communication provides opportunities for teachers and parents to exchange information about students' academic progress, attendance, behaviour and learning difficulties.

The finding corresponds with previous research in Tanzania that identified communication problems between schools and community members as one of the challenges affecting effective community engagement.

Similarly, Nyembeke (2016) found that 67% of parents in community secondary schools in Tanzania were not effectively involved in their children's academic activities, including communication with teachers and other school personnel. This finding supports the current study because low communication may limit parents' ability to understand their children's academic needs and participate effectively in supporting learning at home.

Poor communication can create a gap between what teachers expect from parents and what parents understand about their responsibilities. Establishing regular communication channels could therefore strengthen collaboration and enable parents to respond more effectively to students' academic needs.

4.3 Low Attendance at School Meetings

Although attendance at school meetings was higher than the other indicators, the overall rate of 31.3% indicates that a majority of parents were still not regularly attending meetings. The variation among schools is particularly important. Frank Weston recorded 47.1%, while Mgomba recorded only 12.5%.

4.5 Contextual Challenges and Interpretation

The measured results establish low and uneven engagement, while previous Tanzanian studies provide useful context for interpreting why such patterns may occur. Earlier research has identified poverty, low educational levels, geographical distance, communication difficulties and top-down decision-making as factors that can limit effective community participation in education (Nyembeke, 2016; Wanjara, 2019; Mulokozi & Boniface, 2025). These factors should be treated as contextual explanations rather than as independently quantified causal effects in the present study.

In rural settings, economic and time constraints may reduce parents' availability for school activities, while limited formal education may affect confidence in supporting secondary-level learning. Distance between households and schools can also make regular physical attendance difficult. Such explanations are consistent with the observed low rates of home supervision, communication and meeting attendance, but the present cross-sectional evidence does not establish that any single factor caused the reported participation levels.

Accordingly, improving community engagement requires more than requesting parents to attend meetings. Schools need engagement approaches that are responsive to parents' availability, communication access, educational backgrounds and local socioeconomic

circumstances, while further research should measure these barriers directly and relate them to specific forms of participation.

4.6 Implications for Academic Performance

The findings have important implications for the support surrounding students' learning. Previous Tanzanian research has reported a positive relationship between parental involvement and students' academic achievement (Mwakililo & Mgaya, 2021). In the present study, however, academic performance was not analysed as an outcome against each engagement indicator; therefore, the findings should be interpreted as evidence of weaknesses in the learning-support environment rather than as proof that low engagement caused poor academic performance.

The particularly low levels of home supervision, parent-teacher communication and homework monitoring may reduce opportunities for parents and teachers to identify learning difficulties early, reinforce study routines and coordinate support for students.

Academic outcomes are influenced by multiple factors, including teacher availability, teaching and learning materials, school leadership, student motivation, attendance, school infrastructure and the home environment. Community engagement is therefore one component of a broader educational support system, and stronger evidence on its relationship with achievement would require direct analysis of examination results or other academic-performance measures.

This suggests that improving community engagement requires more than simply requesting parents to attend meetings. Schools need to develop engagement approaches that recognise parents' socioeconomic circumstances, educational backgrounds and availability.

4.6 Implications for Academic Performance

The findings have important implications for academic performance. Mwakililo and Mgaya (2021) found a strong positive relationship between parental involvement and students' academic achievement in Tanzanian community secondary schools.

Therefore, the low levels of home supervision, parent-teacher communication and homework monitoring found in Tunduru District represent potential weaknesses in the support system surrounding students' learning.

The results do not imply that low community engagement is the only cause of poor academic performance. Academic outcomes are influenced by multiple factors, including teacher availability, teaching and learning materials, school leadership, student motivation, attendance, school infrastructure and the home environment. However, weak community engagement may reduce the support available to address some of these factors.

Based on the findings, the study recommends that schools strengthen parent-teacher communication through regular parent meetings, telephone calls, SMS, WhatsApp groups where feasible and individual consultations concerning students' academic progress; increase community awareness of the importance of participation in students' education, emphasising that parental involvement includes monitoring attendance, encouraging study, checking homework and communicating with teachers rather than only providing financial contributions; establish flexible meeting arrangements that take account of parents' agricultural and other economic responsibilities and use community-based communication strategies to reach parents who cannot attend physical meetings; provide parents with simple practical guidance on creating study time, checking homework, monitoring attendance and encouraging students without requiring advanced subject knowledge; and work with ward and district education authorities to monitor the effectiveness of parent-school engagement and support schools where participation is particularly low. Future studies should examine the relationship between specific forms of community engagement and students' actual academic performance using larger samples and, where possible, combine questionnaire data with examination results, attendance records and qualitative interviews to establish stronger evidence concerning how community engagement relates to academic achievement.

Second, schools should increase community awareness. Parents and community leaders should be sensitised about the importance of their participation in students' education. Awareness programmes should emphasise that parental involvement includes monitoring attendance, encouraging study, checking homework and communicating with teachers rather than only providing financial contributions.

Third, schools should establish flexible meeting arrangements. Since many rural parents have agricultural and other economic responsibilities, schools should consider meeting times that are convenient for parents and use community-based communication strategies to reach parents who cannot attend physical meetings.

Fourth, parents should be encouraged to supervise learning at home. Schools should provide parents with simple guidance on how to create study time, check homework, monitor attendance and encourage students without requiring parents to have advanced knowledge of school subjects.

Fifth, local education authorities should strengthen school-community partnership mechanisms. Ward and district education officials should monitor the effectiveness of parent-school engagement and support schools where community participation is particularly low.

Sixth, future studies should investigate the relationship between specific forms of community engagement and students' actual academic performance. Future researchers should use larger samples and, where possible, combine questionnaire data with examination results, attendance records and qualitative interviews to establish stronger evidence concerning how community engagement affects academic achievement.

ACKNOWLEDGEMENT

The researcher acknowledges the support and cooperation provided by the selected secondary schools, teachers, parents, students and other respondents who participated in the study. Appreciation is also extended to the relevant education authorities and individuals who provided information and guidance during the research process.

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