



School Management and the Tension Between Administrative Participation and Learning-Oriented Partnerships in Tanzanian Primary Schools

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Abstract

School–community partnerships can support early-grade learning, yet how school management connects community participation with children’s learning remains insufficiently understood in underperforming primary schools. This study aims to examine school management practices and perceived barriers to learning-oriented partnerships in Ukerewe District, Tanzania. The study employed a qualitative phenomenological design in ten public primary schools purposively selected for persistently low Standard Two assessment performance. Data were collected through semi-structured interviews with 20 early-grade teachers and 10 head teachers and through 12 focus group discussions with 129 parents from six of the schools. Interview and discussion transcripts were analyzed thematically. The findings revealed four interconnected areas: school–parent communication, instructional resource access, community collaboration, and relational trust and proposed coaching. School personnel described meetings, book lending, and community contributions, whereas some parents reported limited communication, inconvenient schedules, and insufficient recognition of their ability to support children’s learning. These contrasting accounts highlighted a tension between mobilizing families for administration and infrastructure and developing reciprocal partnerships around home learning. The study contributes context-specific evidence of this distinction, with implications for accessible two-way communication, practical home-learning resources, and respectful school–family collaboration.

ARTICLE HISTORY

Received:

19 August 2024

Accepted:

18 September 2026

Published:

30 September 2026

KEYWORDS

Early-grade learning; School–community partnerships; School leadership; Parental engagement; Tanzania



1. Introduction

Foundational literacy and numeracy develop through learning opportunities provided both at school and at home. In the early primary grades, teachers introduce essential reading, writing, and mathematical skills, while families may support attendance, encourage practice, and respond to children's emerging learning needs. Evidence from Tanzania has highlighted the importance of home and school conditions for early literacy, including differences in access to learning materials and family support (Ndijuye & Beatus, 2024; Ndijuye & Dadi, 2024).



Such evidence makes school–community partnerships (SCP) relevant to early-grade education, particularly where schools face persistent learning challenges. However, the educational value of a partnership depends not only on whether parents and community members participate but also on what their participation enables children to learn.

School–community partnerships encompass communication between school staff and families, participation in decisions, contributions to school resources, and activities that connect classroom teaching with learning at home. These forms of engagement serve related but different purposes. Attending general meetings, contributing materials, or helping improve school facilities can sustain school operations, whereas discussing individual learning difficulties, accessing take-home books, and agreeing on feasible learning activities can connect family participation more directly with instruction. Research supports the importance of distinguishing among forms of parental involvement. Kim's (2022) synthesis found an overall positive association between parental involvement and achievement, but different patterns for parental expectations and homework assistance. Similarly, Ma et al. (2024) identified variation in associations between parenting self-efficacy and home-based, school-based, and relational forms of engagement. A meta-analysis of parental involvement programs also identifies academic and social-emotional outcomes as distinct dimensions of support (Cosso et al., 2022), while a meta-analysis of mathematics performance shows that associations vary by involvement type and educational context (Wang & Wei, 2024). These findings caution against treating participation as a single, uniform educational practice.

School management shapes the opportunities through which such participation occurs. Head teachers and other school staff influence how meetings are organized, how information is communicated, whether learning materials are accessible, and how disagreements with families are addressed. Monfrance et al. (2025) found that differences in teachers' perceptions, perceived competence, and communication opportunities help explain variation in parental engagement in primary education. A mixed-methods study in Uganda likewise associated effective school management with parental trust and participation, while showing that community involvement could be less constructive when conflicts emerged (Kobayashi & Ogawa, 2025). Research from Ghana also shows that principal leadership can matter for the implementation of primary reading interventions, although these findings pertain to a different intervention context (Lee & Moussa, 2026). Together, these studies suggest that productive partnerships depend on organizational arrangements and relationships, not simply on families' willingness to attend school activities.

The distinction between formal involvement and meaningful collaboration also arises in research on how parents and teachers understand their

responsibilities. In disadvantaged rural secondary schools in Nigeria, Anazia et al. (2025) documented shared expectations regarding responsibility and communication, as well as disagreements over parents' roles in educational decisions. Although this evidence comes from a different school level and national setting, it shows why participation cannot be assessed solely through school-initiated invitations or contributions. Evidence from Pakistan and Ethiopia also documents differences in caregiver engagement and the limited attention given to learning during school disruptions (Aslam et al., 2024). In rural Côte d'Ivoire, parental involvement and expectations have been associated with children's academic and learning-related skills (Aurora et al., 2024). More broadly, Mocho et al. (2025) identified inconsistencies in how parental school involvement is conceptualized and measured. These studies point to the need to examine both the activities described as partnership and the extent to which participants regard those activities as reciprocal and learning-focused.

Tanzanian research provides further reasons to investigate these processes in the early grades. Ndijuye and Beatus (2024) identified constraints related to home learning conditions and teaching resources in their study of early literacy across rural and urban settings. Shukia and Marobo (2024) reported challenges in parental engagement in pre-primary education in socioeconomically marginalized communities. In primary schools in Tabora Region, Nyang'anyi and Bhalalusesa (2023) found differences in parent–teacher communication, trust, and cooperation between higher- and lower-performing schools, with work schedules and limited awareness constraining some families' involvement. Research on children's home literacy environments also indicates that access to literacy resources and home activities can be relevant even after accounting for family characteristics (Zhang et al., 2024). These findings show that family participation is shaped by material conditions, relationships, and competing responsibilities rather than by parental interest alone.

Studies of teacher preparation further illuminate the role of schools in facilitating engagement. In Tanzania, Mujtaba et al. (2024) evaluated training intended to strengthen parental involvement in primary education. They reported improvements in some teacher beliefs and reported invitation practices, although effects were not consistent across all outcomes. An experimental study in India further examined parent-directed activities for foundational literacy and numeracy, underscoring the importance of specifying what families are asked to do rather than merely counting participation (Shashidhara et al., 2026). This evidence suggests that professional learning may support engagement efforts, but it does not explain how school leaders organize sustained collaboration around children's everyday learning needs. Therefore, evidence on home-based learning and teacher–parent contact needs to be more closely linked to school-level management practices, especially in settings where early-grade achievement remains a concern.

This issue is pertinent to public primary schools that consistently perform poorly on Tanzania's Standard Two assessments. In these settings, school leaders may be required to address infrastructure and resource shortages while also encouraging cooperation around pupils' literacy, numeracy, attendance, and learning at home. Administrative participation and learning-oriented collaboration are not mutually exclusive: improvements in school facilities and access to materials may create conditions for learning. Nevertheless, contributions to school development do not in themselves establish that families receive timely information, have opportunities to share knowledge about their children, or participate in decisions concerning learning support. Therefore, understanding how school management negotiates these different purposes is an important educational question.

Although previous scholarship has documented associations among parental involvement, learning, constraints on family engagement, and selected school or teacher practices, less is understood about how head teachers, teachers, and parents perceive the same management arrangements for learning-oriented partnerships in underperforming early-primary schools. Existing studies offer valuable insights into particular forms of engagement, yet they provide a less integrated account of how communication, instructional resources, community collaboration, and relational trust interact in the organization of school–community relationships. Addressing this gap requires attention to differences among stakeholder perspectives and to the distinction between participation in general school affairs and cooperation directed toward children's educational needs.

Accordingly, this study aims to examine the roles and practices of school management in facilitating school–community partnerships for early-grade learning, as well as the barriers perceived by head teachers, teachers, and parents. It draws on their accounts from ten public primary schools in Ukerewe District, Tanzania, selected for persistently low Standard Two assessment performance. The central question is how school management practices are perceived to support or constrain reciprocal, learning-oriented collaboration between schools and families. By examining the purposes, organization, and relational conditions of participation, the study seeks to clarify the distinction between administrative mobilization and partnerships more directly connected with early-grade learning. This focus offers a context-specific contribution to understanding school leadership and family engagement in resource-constrained primary education.

2. Methods

This study employed a qualitative design with a phenomenological orientation to examine how school leaders, teachers, and parents experienced and understood school–community partnerships (SCP) for early-grade learning. This orientation was appropriate for eliciting participants' accounts of organizational practices and barriers in their school contexts. The analysis focused on perceived responsibilities, forms of participation, and differences among stakeholder accounts rather than testing whether partnership activities caused changes in pupil achievement (Creswell, 2014).

The research was conducted in ten public primary schools in Ukerewe District, Tanzania. Schools were purposively selected because they had recorded low performance in Standard Two national assessments for three consecutive years, according to assessment information obtained from the District Education Officer (NECTA, 2020). This criterion provided a focused setting in which school management and community participation could be examined alongside concerns about foundational learning. The sample was not intended to represent all primary schools in the district or country.

Participants included 20 teachers and 10 head teachers from the ten schools. Teachers responsible for Grade One and Grade Two were purposively recruited because their instructional responsibilities involved regular contact with families concerning pupils' early learning. Head teachers were included because they were responsible for school management and the organization of school–community relationships. Therefore, the two professional groups provided complementary perspectives on both classroom-level and school-level practices.

Parents of children enrolled from pre-primary through Grade Two were recruited through convenience sampling, with invitations coordinated by head teachers and participation dependent on availability and willingness to contribute. Twelve focus group discussions (FGDs) were held in six of the ten schools, involving 129 parents (79 men and 50 women). Parent accounts consequently represent the experiences of focus group participants at those six schools and should not be interpreted as encompassing the views of all families across the ten schools.

Data were generated through semi-structured individual interviews with teachers and head teachers and through FGDs with parents. Separate interview and discussion guides were used to elicit perspectives on school–parent communication, learning resources, participation in school activities, relationships between families and school personnel, and barriers to collaboration. Participants' accounts were digitally recorded and supported by field notes. The recordings were transcribed verbatim, read repeatedly, and prepared for qualitative analysis. Identifying details were removed from the transcriptions, and pseudonyms were used in reporting.

Thematic analysis followed the six-phase approach of Braun and Clarke (2006). After familiarization, the researcher applied an initial codebook, developed from the research questions and relevant literature, to meaningful segments of the interview and FGD transcripts. Related codes were grouped into categories, reviewed against the accounts, and refined into themes reflecting both shared perceptions and contrasts across stakeholder groups. Microsoft Excel was used to organize coded material; summaries of recurring codes provided supplementary descriptive information rather than serving as the basis for statistical comparisons or theme rankings. Themes were defined and reported in relation to the study’s purpose and illustrative participant accounts.

Credibility was addressed through triangulation of interview and focus group accounts, as well as member checking. In presenting findings, interview statements are attributed to the relevant professional group and school, while parent quotations are identified by their focus group and school. Contrasting accounts were retained rather than reconciled into a single institutional viewpoint. Because the data concern participants’ experiences and reported practices, they provide insight into perceived partnership arrangements rather than independent measures of how frequently activities occurred or how much pupils learned.

3. Results

The thematic analysis identified four interrelated dimensions of how school management was perceived to facilitate or constrain SCP for early-grade learning: school–parent communication, access to instructional resources, community collaboration, and relational trust and guidance. Evidence came from interviews with 20 early-grade teachers and 10 head teachers from 10 schools, and from 12 FGDs with 129 parents from 6 schools. Although participants shared expectations about school management responsibilities, they differed in their descriptions of the accessibility and purpose of partnership activities. Table 1 presents the main practices and contrasting perspectives associated with each theme.

Table 1.
Reported School Management Practices and Stakeholder Perspectives on School–Community Partnerships

Theme	Reported practices	Contrasting perspectives and constraints
Communication	Parent meetings, individual invitations, homework follow-up, and proposed home visits	Head teachers reported low attendance, while some parents reported insufficient invitations and inconvenient meeting schedules.
Instructional resources	Provision and lending of books, preparation of teaching and	Teachers and parents identified opportunities to support home

	learning aids, and mobilization of material support	learning, but limited resources constrained participation.
School–community collaboration	Volunteering, infrastructure development, and teachers' participation in community events	Community support varied according to school–community relationships and expectations about responsibility.
Trust and coaching	Mutual respect, guidance for parents and teachers, and encouragement of learning at home	Parents reported feeling undervalued, while teachers and head teachers described tensions arising from disagreements over pupil discipline.

Source: Authors' qualitative synthesis of fieldwork findings (2023). The table describes reported themes rather than unverified response frequencies.

3.1 Communication Between Schools and Parents

Communication emerged as an important responsibility of school management in strengthening SCP. Teachers, head teachers, and parents described parent meetings, individual invitations, homework follow-up, and home visits as potential means of connecting schools with families. However, participants differed in their assessments of how consistently communication occurred and whose responsibilities were being fulfilled.

Parent meetings were commonly identified as a means of sharing information about school plans, performance, and development needs. Teachers considered these meetings important for encouraging parental involvement in school activities. One teacher explained that when parents were informed about school achievements and future plans, they were more willing to contribute to school development (Interview, teacher, School A). Parents similarly described meetings as opportunities to understand school needs and participate in decisions. They distinguished between class meetings, which could address children's learning, and general school meetings, which often concerned school performance and infrastructure, including classrooms, toilets, and desks.

Nevertheless, some parents reported insufficient opportunities to participate. One parent stated: "On my side, I have never been invited by the head of the school for meetings. Rarely does the class teacher call me in case of any challenge related to my child's learning or absenteeism" (FGD with parents, School F). This account contrasts with the perspective of some head teachers, who reported inviting parents but receiving limited responses. As one head teacher explained: "In most cases, parents do not attend school meetings even when invited" (Interview, head teacher, School H).

The contrasting accounts indicate a difference between how school managers described their communication efforts and how some parents experienced opportunities for involvement. Parents also identified inconvenient

meeting schedules, economic responsibilities, and farming activities as constraints on attendance. These circumstances suggest that participation could be affected by both the communication practices of schools and the availability of families.

Individual invitations were considered particularly relevant when children experienced prolonged absence, learning difficulties, or health-related challenges. Parents described invitations as opportunities to identify problems that might otherwise remain unnoticed. A parent from School G explained that contacting families could help schools and parents recognize absenteeism and discuss appropriate follow-up. Similarly, a head teacher from School D reported that communication with parents provided information about pupils' learning pace and health circumstances that teachers might not otherwise know.

Participants also referred to homework and home visits as possible connections between classroom instruction and family support. Homework was considered an opportunity for parents to follow their children's learning and communicate difficulties to teachers. Home visits were mentioned as another possible means of engagement, although they received less emphasis in the reported accounts. The study did not document a standardized system for monitoring homework-related communication or the implementation of home visits across the selected schools.

Overall, the findings identify communication as a shared expectation but reveal differences in its perceived accessibility and implementation. Meetings often concerned general school development, while individual contact provided opportunities to discuss children's learning and attendance. The evidence suggests that communication was not experienced uniformly by school managers and parents.

3.2 Access to Instructional Resources and Home-Learning Support

The second theme concerned the availability of instructional resources and their potential contribution to cooperation between teachers and parents. Participants identified books, teaching, and learning aids as resources that school management could help secure and make accessible. These resources were considered important not only for classroom instruction but also for activities undertaken by children at home.

Teachers and parents described book availability as a practical link between school learning and family participation. Parents reported that borrowing books could help them understand what their children were learning and provide additional learning activities at home. Teachers similarly described lending books to pupils and encouraging families to use them outside school hours. One teacher explained: "I provide books to pupils for home reading. Upon returning, some report that their parents request additional books as they have already completed the assigned tasks" (Interview, teacher, School F).

A teacher's account of families' requests for additional books illustrates a connection between school resources and home learning. The interviews did not establish how consistently such borrowing occurred or whether it was associated with changes in reading achievement.

Teachers also identified the allocation of school funds and requests for external support, including contributions from parents or donors, as possible ways of increasing book availability. These suggestions reflected the resource constraints experienced by schools and the expectation that management could help coordinate responses to shortages.

Teaching and learning aids constituted another area of possible collaboration. Participants referred to materials such as manila cards, marker pens, and other resources used for classroom activities. Teachers described involving parents in the preparation of these materials when resources and parental skills were available. One teacher stated: "I request parents to come to school on Saturdays and help to make teaching aids if there are sufficient materials. Some parents have good drawing skills, so they help to draw different pictures" (Interview, teacher, School A).

The account illustrates a form of participation extending beyond financial contributions. Parents could contribute practical skills to the preparation of educational materials, while teachers provided guidance about classroom needs. Nevertheless, such collaboration depended on the availability of materials, the time parents could contribute, and opportunities organized by the school.

These accounts positioned instructional resources as both classroom materials and opportunities for family engagement. Book lending and joint preparation of learning aids connected parental participation to identifiable educational activities, although access depended on materials, parental time, and opportunities arranged by schools.

3.3 Collaboration and Community Participation in School Activities

The third theme concerned school management responsibilities for maintaining positive relationships with communities and encouraging voluntary participation in school activities. Teachers and parents described collaboration through contributions of labor and materials, involvement in school development, and relationships extending beyond formal school meetings.

Participants reported that parents and community members were invited to support activities such as classroom construction, toilet improvements, and the provision of desks. These contributions were considered important when schools faced resource limitations. However, teachers indicated that communities' willingness to participate varied across settings. One teacher explained:

"When constructing classrooms, the head teacher's success in engaging parents for assistance depends on the school's relationship with the community. In some areas, parents readily participate, while in others, they

perceive it as the government's responsibility" (Interview, teacher, School F).

This account indicates that community participation was associated with both school–community relationships and expectations about responsibility for school infrastructure. It also illustrates that resource mobilization could not be assumed to occur uniformly across schools.

Parents placed particular emphasis on the relationship between schools and community life. They described teachers' participation in village activities and significant social occasions as a way of maintaining familiarity and mutual respect. One parent explained:

"In a village, if teachers do not attend during challenging times, like a funeral, it hinders the sense of community partnership. However, their presence fosters a sense of friendship with the community, leading to more enthusiastic participation in school activities" (FGD with parents, School B).

The statement suggests that some parents understood school–community relationships through everyday social interaction rather than formal administrative contact alone. Teachers' presence during important community events was interpreted as a sign of involvement in community life.

Teachers also identified respectful relationships as relevant to collaboration. Some reported disagreements with parents over disciplinary practices and perceived these disagreements as barriers to constructive communication. Such accounts indicate that expectations concerning teacher authority, parental responsibility, and respectful interaction could influence school–community relationships.

Although volunteering and infrastructure development were prominent in the accounts, the evidence provides less detail on jointly organized activities that directly target early-grade literacy or numeracy. Therefore, the reported forms of collaboration need to be distinguished from structured educational partnerships centered specifically on children's learning.

Taken together, these findings indicate that community participation was influenced by the relationships maintained between schools and families, the resources available to them, and their expectations about shared responsibilities. School management was viewed as having a coordinating role, but participants did not describe a uniform pattern of collaboration across the selected schools.

3.4 Relational Trust and Coaching for Partnership Development

The fourth theme concerned relational trust and guidance for teachers and parents. Although these issues received less attention than meetings and instructional resources, participants described tensions that could affect the willingness of school personnel and families to cooperate.

Parents reported that some teachers underestimated their ability to contribute to children's learning, particularly in mathematics. One parent stated:

"These teachers think that we do not know mathematics. They do not ask for our advice sometimes. They think because we are not educated, we cannot do anything" (FGD with parents, School B). This account highlights a perceived imbalance in the relationship between teachers and parents. The parent associated limited involvement not only with opportunities for communication but also with assumptions about parental knowledge and educational capability.

Teachers and head teachers described different sources of tension. Some reported that disagreements about the punishment of pupils could lead to confrontations between parents and school staff. A head teacher from School D described situations in which teachers felt insulted when parents challenged disciplinary decisions. These accounts suggest that tensions around pupil discipline were experienced as obstacles to cooperation. They do not establish that particular disciplinary practices were appropriate or that either group was solely responsible for the disagreement.

Participants also identified guidance and coaching as possible responsibilities of school management. These included helping teachers communicate with parents, encouraging families to support learning at home, and assisting both groups in identifying ways to cooperate. Motivation of pupils to undertake learning activities outside school was also mentioned as a relevant concern. However, the original accounts provide limited evidence of a structured coaching program, regular parent training sessions, or a systematic review of partnership practices. Guidance and coaching were primarily described as responsibilities that school managers should undertake rather than as consistently documented programs implemented across the ten schools.

The findings show that partnership development involved more than formal invitations and material contributions. Participants also expressed concerns about respect, assumptions concerning parental competence, and disagreements over educational responsibilities. These relational issues formed part of the context in which communication and collaboration occurred.

Across the four themes, the evidence indicates that stakeholders recognized a central role for school management in organizing SCP. However, their accounts differed concerning the accessibility, purpose, and quality of existing arrangements. Parent meetings and infrastructure-related contributions were visible features of participation, whereas structured support for learning at home and sustained reciprocal communication received less attention. The study thus identifies a distinction between partnership activities associated with general school administration and those more directly connected to early-grade learning. These findings concern participants' experiences and reported practices; they do not establish the effects of SCP on pupils' literacy or numeracy achievement.

4. Discussion

4.1 From Administrative Communication to Learning-Oriented Exchange

The first finding reveals a discrepancy between the communication that school managers reported organizing and the opportunities some parents said they actually experienced. Head teachers emphasized meetings and invitations, whereas parents described irregular contact, inconvenient schedules, and limited discussion of individual learning needs. This distinction matters because the existence of a meeting does not establish that information flows in both directions or addresses early-grade learning. Research in Tanzanian primary schools similarly identifies differences in parental engagement associated with communication, trust, and socioeconomic responsibilities (Nyang'anyi & Bhalalusesa, 2023). Monfrance et al. (2025) also show that teachers' perceptions and available communication channels help explain variation in parent–teacher contact. Therefore, the present findings locate partnership barriers partly in institutional arrangements, not exclusively in parental willingness.

A learning-oriented interpretation of communication shifts attention from how often parents attend school towards what families and teachers can jointly address. Individual invitations regarding absenteeism, learning difficulties, and homework appeared more directly connected with children's educational experiences than meetings primarily concerned with school construction. This interpretation accords with Mocho et al. (2025), who document inconsistencies in how parental involvement is defined and measured, and Ma et al. (2024), who distinguish school-based participation from home-based engagement and parent–teacher relationships. Mujtaba et al. (2024) provide particularly relevant Tanzanian evidence that teacher training can improve reported invitations to parents, although not all professional outcomes changed significantly. These studies support the importance of communication practices, but the Ukerewe data cannot establish that any particular arrangement improved pupil achievement.

4.2 Learning Resources and the Practical Conditions of Family Engagement

Book lending and the collaborative preparation of teaching aids illustrate how school management may connect classroom instruction with participation at home. A teacher reported parents requesting additional reading materials, while another described inviting parents with drawing skills to help prepare learning aids. These examples broaden the meaning of parental contribution beyond fees, construction materials, or attendance. Evidence from Ghana associates books and home reading interactions with children's literacy (Lee & Moussa, 2024), while Tanzanian studies describe unequal access to supportive home environments and instructional facilities (Ndijuye & Beatus, 2024; Ndijuye & Dadi, 2024). However, these comparative findings do not establish that the reported

practices in Ukerewe produced literacy gains. The present contribution concerns access to participation, rather than demonstrated instructional effectiveness.

Resource availability also shapes whose participation is feasible. Asking families to supervise homework or prepare classroom materials can exclude those facing financial constraints, demanding work schedules, or limited access to books. Studies in disadvantaged Tanzanian communities report precisely such constraints on early educational engagement (Shukia & Marobo, 2024), while wider evidence from sub-Saharan Africa identifies material and educational barriers to parental involvement (Kambona, 2025). Moreover, Kim's (2022) second-order meta-analysis distinguishes parental expectations from homework help, finding mixed evidence for the latter, and Xu et al. (2024) show that the quality of homework support matters. Hence, schools should not treat the quantity of parental tasks as a proxy for effective partnership. Accessible materials and achievable activities may be more appropriate priorities, subject to evaluation.

4.3 Community Mobilization, Shared Responsibility, and School Leadership

Community contributions to classrooms, desks, and sanitation facilities were prominent in participants' accounts, indicating that school–community partnership already supported important material conditions for education. However, these activities should not be equated with systematic cooperation around children's reading or numeracy. This distinction should not diminish infrastructure investment: rather, it identifies two legitimate but different purposes of participation. Research in Ugandan public primary education similarly finds that participation can support educational quality while conflicts and ineffective management can undermine its benefits (Kobayashi & Ogawa, 2025). Evidence from rural India and Madagascar demonstrates that community engagement can support foundational skills when combined with defined learning activities and organizational arrangements (Kumar et al., 2024; Maruyama & Igei, 2024). Those interventions, however, were evaluated experimentally and cannot establish comparable effects in Ukerewe.

The interviews also indicate that school management operated within wider community relationships. Parents valued teachers' presence at funerals and other village occasions, while teachers described variation in willingness to volunteer depending on local expectations about government responsibility. This suggests that institutional collaboration is negotiated through both social recognition and formal requests. Research on rural Nigerian home–school partnerships identifies shared responsibility and communication as valued principles, while revealing discrepancies between stated expectations and actual participation (Anazia et al., 2025). Although that study involved secondary schools, it offers a useful relational comparison. Evidence from primary schools in Uganda additionally associates effective management committees with

parental trust and participation (Kobayashi & Ogawa, 2025). The Ukerewe findings illustrate these relational conditions without demonstrating their causal effects.

4.4 Trust, Parental Agency, and Professional Learning

Parents' reports that teachers underestimated their ability to assist with mathematics expose an important limit of school-defined participation. When parents are invited to contribute labor but not recognized as knowledgeable partners, formal involvement may coexist with unequal influence over educational decisions. This interpretation resonates with findings from rural Nigeria, where teachers and parents endorsed shared responsibility but differed in their expectations of participation (Anazia et al., 2025). Research on primary-school communication likewise links engagement differences to teachers' perceptions and professional confidence rather than parent characteristics alone (Monfrance et al., 2025). A phenomenological study involving Indigenous West Papuan parents and teachers distinguishes transactional from culturally responsive collaboration and warns against blaming families for difficulties rooted in school relationships (Sianturi et al., 2023). Contexts differ, but the principle of recognizing parental agency is pertinent.

Tensions over pupil discipline further indicate that trust cannot be inferred from attendance at meetings or community donations. Such disagreements involve expectations about authority, care, and mutual respect, and the available accounts do not establish which participants' interpretations were more accurate. Tanzanian research reports stronger parent–teacher trust and cooperation in higher-performing schools, but its qualitative design also precludes simple causal explanations (Nyang'anyi & Bhalalusesa, 2023). Evidence from Uganda similarly cautions that increased participation is not invariably beneficial when conflicts arise (Kobayashi & Ogawa, 2025). Therefore, the present results support an understanding of trust as a condition requiring ongoing negotiation rather than an assumed consequence of school outreach. School leaders may need mechanisms for listening, resolving disagreements, and providing respectful feedback.

Participants identified coaching and parent guidance primarily as needed forms of support rather than established programs. This suggests a potential professional-learning role for school leaders, particularly in helping teachers communicate learning needs, acknowledge parents' circumstances, and resolve disagreements constructively. Tanzanian evidence indicates that teacher training can improve some beliefs and invitation practices concerning parental involvement, although not all outcomes changed (Mujtaba et al., 2024). Research on implementing parenting support in educational settings likewise emphasizes professional capacity and organizational conditions (Moller et al., 2024). Such

evidence helps identify plausible approaches but does not demonstrate the effectiveness of coaching in the participating schools.

4.5 Conceptual Contribution and Implications for Elementary Education

Across the four themes, this study distinguishes administrative mobilization from learning-oriented partnership without treating them as competing or mutually exclusive approaches. Infrastructure, volunteering, and general school meetings can support school functioning, while access to books, discussion of pupil difficulties, and feasible home-learning activities are more directly connected to foundational learning. This distinction contributes an organizational interpretation grounded in contrasting accounts from head teachers, teachers, and parents in persistently low-performing primary schools. It also sharpens a measurement concern highlighted by Mocho et al. (2025): counting contacts or contributions may obscure their actual educational purpose. The distinction is consistent with meta-analytic evidence indicating that different parental practices have distinct associations with achievement (Kim, 2022; Ma et al., 2024). However, it remains an interpretive finding, not a validated typology or causal model.

Practical implications follow from the reported barriers, although they require testing. Head teachers could organize communication that is at times accessible to families, establish individual follow-up on attendance and learning needs, and support modest book-lending or take-home activities. Teachers could invite parental knowledge and provide guidance that recognizes different levels of literacy, time, and material resources. Such measures are more closely linked to everyday learning than invitations limited to infrastructure contributions. Evidence from structured interventions in India and Madagascar demonstrates potential gains when community participation is deliberately linked to learning support (Kumar et al., 2024; Maruyama & Igei, 2024). These studies justify further evaluation, not claims that the proposed measures will necessarily improve performance in Tanzanian schools. Equity and feasibility should guide implementation.

4.6 Limitations and Future Research

These interpretations must be considered in relation to the study's purposive selection of ten schools with persistently low Standard Two assessment performance. Parents participated in FGDs at only six schools, and recruitment through head teachers may have limited access to less-engaged families. Therefore, the accounts cannot be treated as representative of schools or families throughout Ukerewe District. Interview and FGD data also document participants' experiences rather than directly observed communication frequency, partnership quality, or pupil learning outcomes. The reported coding summaries were used descriptively; they do not support quantitative comparisons between stakeholder groups.

Future studies could compare school–community partnerships across schools with different assessment profiles and include parents who seldom attend school meetings. Observational and longitudinal research could track the accessibility, content, and continuity of school–family contact, including the use of take-home reading materials and follow-up for pupils experiencing learning difficulties. Mixed-methods or intervention studies could then examine whether specific management arrangements are feasible and acceptable to families and whether they are associated with measurable gains in foundational literacy and numeracy. These approaches would test the transferability and educational significance of the administrative-to-learning distinction identified in this study.

5. Conclusion

This qualitative study examined how head teachers, teachers, and parents perceived school management roles and barriers to the implementation of Mutangira-Ln SCP for early-grade learning in 10 public primary schools in Ukerewe District, Tanzania. Four linked dimensions emerged: school–parent communication, access to instructional resources, community collaboration, and relational trust and guidance. Stakeholder accounts revealed a distinction between mobilizing families for general school administration and infrastructure and engaging them in reciprocal activities connected to children’s learning. These forms of participation may complement one another. However, meetings and material contributions alone do not indicate that parents have accessible opportunities to discuss pupils’ needs or support learning at home.

The study contributes a context-specific organizational interpretation of school–community partnership by showing how the purpose, accessibility, and relational quality of participation shape its perceived relevance to early-grade learning. Practical implications include more accessible two-way communication, feasible home-learning resources, recognition of parents’ knowledge, and constructive support for teachers and families. These implications remain proposals rather than demonstrated interventions: evidence came from purposively selected schools, parent discussions took place in six schools, and changes in literacy or numeracy were not assessed. Future comparative and longitudinal studies should examine how partnership arrangements are implemented and whether learning-oriented collaboration supports pupils’ educational outcomes.

Declarations

All authors reviewed and endorsed the final manuscript and reported no conflicts of interest. The research adhered to ethical guidelines, secured appropriate consent, and safeguarded participant confidentiality. Grammarly was employed to enhance academic language and citation consistency. No research data were produced using AI. The authors verified the manuscript and assume full responsibility for its accuracy and integrity.

Acknowledgments

The study acknowledges the readiness and acceptance of the study informants, whose views and discussions made this work possible. The authors also acknowledge financial support from the University of Dodoma (UDOM) during their PhD studies, which enabled data collection and analysis.

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