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The Role of Digital Literacy in Strengthening Parental Participation in Schooling

*Immanuel Nakambale[1] & Elock Emvula Shikalepo[1] iD

[1]The International University of Management, Windhoek, Namibia

*Author correspondence: i.nakambale@ium.edu.na

ABSTRACT

This study explored how digital literacy could enable 21st-century parents to actively participate in the education of their children and contribute significantly to improved learner performance in secondary schools, especially in a rural context. Guided by Epstein's Framework of Six Types of Parental Involvement, the study investigates how teachers' role of parenting, communicating, volunteering, learning at home, decision-making, and collaborating with the community, can be enhanced by modern forms of digital communications. A qualitative methodology was employed using a case study design. Data was collected using semi-structured interviews with parents, teachers and grade 12 learners across the secondary case study. Thematic analysis revealed that digital applications such as WhatsApp groups and school portals are increasingly central to school home communication, decision making and collaboration. Parents with access to digital tools and applications, as well as digital competencies, were more able to monitor academic progress and assist with learners' assignments. However persistent barriers such as limited digital literacy, poor connectivity and work life pressures hinder many parents' ability to participate digitally and effectively in their children's education. The study extends the discourse on parental involvement by showing how digital platforms simultaneously enhance and limit engagement. The study further demonstrated the relevance of Epstein's Framework of Six Types of Parental Involvement in the 21st-century, and how best the six types of parental involvement can be digitally mediated by digital tools and applications. Hence, there is a need for targeted efforts to improve parents' digital skills and access to communication tools to enhance parental involvement in the education of their children.

Keywords: Digital literacy, Epstein's Framework, Learner performance, Parental involvement

1. INTRODUCTION

Parental involvement has long been recognised as a key contributor to students' academic success. Traditionally, this involvement encompassed physical presence at school meetings, monitoring homework, and maintaining contact with teachers. However, in the 21st century, parental involvement has expanded to include digital communication tools such as WhatsApp, school learning platforms, and social media, allowing parents to remain engaged regardless of physical or time constraints (Ladesma & Ocay, 2025). Parental involvement remains a key factor in student academic success, particularly as education evolves in the 21st century (Lin, 2025; Ladesma & Ocay, 2025). In today's digital context, parental involvement can extend beyond traditional means to include digital communication tools and applications. Digital platforms have created new opportunities for engagement, while at the same time presenting challenges, especially in rural settings. Parental involvement is often hindered by socio-economic and technological barriers (Nghipandulwa, 2023; Sikwaya, 2024), which once addressed could significantly improve parental involvement in education. Rural educational settings such as Ongha Circuit in the Ohangwena Region, faced issues such as limited internet access, low digital literacy and scarce educational resources, all of which affect the degree and effectiveness of parental engagement with schools.

Despite these challenges, there is growing interest in how modern, digitally mediated parental involvement can be improved to enable parents to capitatlise on digital tools and applications and positively influence learners' academic achievement. As education becomes more digitalised and learner-centered, the role of parents in supporting learning at home and staying informed through online platforms becomes increasingly vital. Understanding how parents, teachers, and learners experience and perceive these new dynamics is essential for designing inclusive strategies that enhance academic achievement informed by parental input especially in rural contexts.

The following questions guided the study:

Research Questions

a) How can parents in Ongha circuit use technologies to participate in education?
b) What are limitations facing parents in using technologies to participate in school activities?
c) How can technologies be used to maximise parental involvement in education?

The following literature review helped to provide the basic understanding for parental involvement in education in a digital era.

2. LITERATURE REVIEW

Advancement in technologies presents various benefits to learners and teachers. For example, technology has been found to be effective in facilitating collaboration among learners and teachers worldwide through online platforms, video conferencing and collaborative tools that enable students to connect with peers and experts from different cultures, fostering a global perspective and encouraging collaborative problem-solving among learners and teachers (Gupta et al. 2020). In addition, technology allows for personalised learning experiences tailored to individual needs and abilities of learners (Goh & Sigala, 2020). Despite the use of technology to

support teaching and learning being well documented, there is little momentum of research on technology and parental involvement in education.

Parental involvement refers to the various ways parents engage in their children's learning, both at home and in school settings. These may include monitoring homework, attending school meetings, encouraging academic discipline, and providing emotional support (Ladesma & Ocay, 2025). Research has consistently shown that learners whose parents are actively involved in their education perform better academically (PISA, 2025). The degree of commitment of parents to schoolwork has been a bone of contention for some time now. School administrators often complain of parents are not involved in the education of their children. While it is necessary for parents to participate in the education of their children, there might be several factors that hinder parental involvement in education. Some of the factors may have traditional roots, such as the cultural orientation of the parent population, their level of education and the value the parents attach to education. Such factors may influence parents' perceptions and involvement in education.

2.1 Theoretical framework on parental involvement in education

Epstein's Framework of Six Types of Parental Involvement provides a clear description of the areas of parental involvement in education, namely, parenting, communicating, volunteering, learning at home, decision-making, and collaborating with the community. Parenting is the parent's responsibility to assist with the home environment and provide support to learners at home. Parenting entails understanding learners and providing a stable home environment. Communicating requires parents to promote effective communication between the school and families about school programs and learners' progress. Volunteering demands that parents as stakeholders volunteer at school functions or take part in other programmes that support learners and school advancement. Regarding leaning at home, families should be involved in learning activities at home, such as assisting learners with their homework and other curriculum-related activities. Decision-Making requires that parents are involved in school decisions, governance and advocacy through relevant structures such as School Board and parent organisations. Collaborating with the Community requires parents to liaise with the community, businesses, agencies and groups to provide resources and services for learners, families and the school. All these performance areas of parents in education are very key to the success of schools and learners. Parents are expected to perform all these roles diligently and without fail to guarantee successful teaching, learning and higher learner achievement.

2.2 Digitalising Parental Involvement

There is a connection between parental involvement and academic success, particularly when the support is consistent and balanced with autonomy (Lin, 2025). Learners perform better when they feel supported both academically and emotionally. According to the OECD (PISA, 2025), even simple acts like asking children about schoolwork or praising effort can lead to higher motivation and improved performance.

The 21st century is characterised by advanced technological innovation, where most of the operations are digitised, digitalised and automated. Hence, there is a need for a shift of mindset among parents to embrace digital communication tools and technologies to optimise their

participation and involvement in schools. A lot of activities and engagement that parents could perform with traditional means can now be carried out through digital platforms. Contemporary parental involvement can be mediated by digital communication tools and applications such as WhatsApp, emails, school portals and video conferencing, all which can be efficient and effective means of engaging with schools. Digital tools and technologies allow parents to remain involved in school activities at minimum cost as compared to traditional ways of involvement which may involve travelling over long distances. However, effective use requires access to internet-enabled devices and digital literacy (Ladesma & Ocay, 2025).

2.3 Challenges facing parental involvement in rural schools

Even though technologies can be efficient and effective in facilitating seamless parental involvement in education, there are challenges in using technologies especially in rural set up. In rural Namibian settings like the Ongha Circuit, parental involvement is often hindered by low literacy levels of the parent population, limited access to technological tools, poor infrastructure, and financial hardship (Nghipandulwa, 2023; Sikwaya, 2024). Many parents do not have the time and the digital tools to fully engage in using modern platforms. In addition, most plants do not have the knowledge of using technological applications in digital tools. Even though schools want to engage parents digitally, this opportunity hardly materialise due to technological deficiencies on the side of the parents (Sikwaya, 2024).

3. RESEARCH METHODOLOGY

A qualitative research methodology was adopted for the study. The chosen methodology made it possible for an in-depth exploration of participants' experiences and views meaningful for understanding the subject that was studied (Braun & Clarke, 2021). A case study design was used as research strategy for detailed, contextual insights (Creswell & Poth, 2021). This design enabled researchers to focus on specific geographical and educational setting of senior secondary schools in the Ongha Circuit and examine the parental involvement within its real-life context. The population consisted of parents, teachers, learners and school principals in Ongha circuit. Purposive sampling was utilised to select participants who had direct experience relevant to the study (Creswell & Poth, 2018). Purposive sampling was particularly useful for selecting information-rich individuals, allowing the researcher to intentionally choose individuals capable of providing deep, contextually relevant data (Palinkas et al., 2015).

Purposive sampling technique ensured that participants advanced relevant insights into the subject of parental involvement. Parents with children enrolled in senior secondary schools were included to explore evolving parental involvement amid shifting educational contexts. Learners representing various grades and academic achievement levels during this period were selected to capture a broad range of experiences influenced by ongoing changes in schooling. Teachers actively engaged in senior secondary education during these years provided professional perspectives on teaching strategies, curriculum adaptations, and student engagement challenges. School principals who led schools in the same period contributed insights into leadership, policy implementation, and institutional responses to the challenges faced. In total, the sample consisted of 15 parents, 12 learners, 10 teachers, and 5 school administrators.

Data was collected using interviews and focus group discussions. Individual interviews were conducted with parents, teachers and school principals. The interview followed an interview guideline and allowed for flexibility without losing sight of research questions. Focus group discussion was conducted with learners in groups of six learners, and this method enabled learners to provide their shared experiences regarding parental involvement in an open and familiar context. The use of multiple data collection methods assisted with the validation of data through cross-verifying of information from different sources (Creswell & Poth, 2018; Etikan, Musa, & Alkassim, 2016).

The data were analysed using thematic analysis, guided by Braun and Clarke's (2021) six-phase approach, namely (1) familiarisation with data, (2) generating initial codes, (3) searching for themes, (4) reviewing themes, (5) defining and naming themes, and (6) writing the report. This method began with familiarisation with the data, allowing the researchers to immerse themselves in the transcripts and gain a comprehensive understanding of the content. Initial codes were then generated manually to capture significant features of the data. Following coding, the researcher searched for themes that emerged across the dataset. Subsequently, the identified themes were reviewed and refined to ensure they accurately reflected the data and research question. These themes were then clearly defined and named to convey their essence effectively. Finally, the analysis culminated in the production of a coherent report that discussed the findings in relation to the research questions.

4. ANALYSIS AND DISCUSSION

Thematic analysis, guided by Braun and Clarke's (2021) six-phase approach, revealed two key themes that collectively illuminate the multifaceted nature of parental involvement in learners' education. These themes are:

a) Technologies as enabler for parental involvement in education
b) Technological limitations facing parental involvement in education

Each theme is discussed in relation to existing literature and interpreted within the socio-cultural context of the Ongha Circuit.

4.1 Technologies as enabler for parental involvement in education

The current advancement in digital tools and applications has revolutionised the way parents are involved in their children's education, providing them new ways to stay informed and engaged. Technological platforms such as online gradebooks, learning management systems and communication applications provide real-time updates and information on learners' academic progress, feedback on assignments and grades and attendance records. These tools and applications bridge the gap between home and school, allowing parents to monitor their children's academic performance and address emerging issues promptly. In addition, technological tools offer a more convenient and flexible means of engagement, as parents can access information at their convenience, instead of relying on traditional face-to-face meetings or paper-based communication methods and can provide the required assistance to the learner, as c onfirmed by one learner participants who said, *"When my mother checks the school group and reminds me about work, I try to finish it."* This level of engagement through technological means helps foster

a stronger sense of partnership and collaboration between parents and educators, ultimately benefiting the children's education.

Beyond tracking learners' schoolwork and grade, digital tools also support parental involvement by offering resources to help parents actively participate in their children's learning. There are many platforms such as WhatsApp groups, where educational materials, activities and virtual workshops aimed at equipping parents with the skills and knowledge to support their children's learning at home can be conducted. These applications facilitate more meaningful communication between parents and teachers, ensuring that both parties are updated with progress regarding learners' progress. Digital tools and technologies remove barriers such as distance or work commitment and empower parents to take a more hands-on approach in their children's education, thereby creating collaborative environment that can lead to improved learner performance.

The use of digital platforms such as WhatsApp, SMS, and school communication systems emerged as both empowering parents to participate in school activities. One parent said, *"I may not come to school often, but the WhatsApp group helps me see if my child has assignments or issues."* Parents with access to smartphones and internet connectivity appreciate the convenience of digital communication. For them, platforms such as WhatsApp created new avenues to monitor academic progress. While technology facilitates quick and convenient communication between schools and parents, disparities in access and digital literacy continue to hinder equitable participation. Some parents do not have smartphones, data bundles, or confidence in using digital platforms, such as one who said: *"I only have a basic phone. I cannot see the messages sent by the teachers."* In addition, teachers are also faced with challenges when using technology to engage with parents, as one teacher remarked that, *some parents reply quickly on WhatsApp. Others never see the messages, probably due to lack of data or know-how."* Another teacher stated that *"Even if we send messages, not all parents receive them. Connectivity and digital skills are still a challenge."* This inconsistency demonstrates that technology alone does not foster involvement; it requires digital competence and infrastructural support. Even though there are some challenges to the use of digital tools to promote parental involvement, digital tools are indeed an enabler for optimum parental involvement in the education of their children.

4.2 Technological limitations facing parental involvement in education

Digital tools and platforms are increasingly becoming useful medium through which parents participate in the education of their children. Applications and digital tools such as learning management systems, school communication applications, online portals and virtual meetings have gained momentum in recent years, and these have made life easier for parents to participate in school activities. Despite these benefits, significant technological drawbacks continue to hinder many parents from effective participation in their children's education. Common technological limitations include limited access to digital devices and internet connectivity, and low digital literacy among parents. These challenges reinforce limited parental participation and reduce the potential benefits of technology-enabled engagement to parents.

4.2.1 Limited access to digital devices and internet connectivity

Parents have unequal access to digital devices and stable internet services, a prevalent problem especially to parents in rural areas. Rural areas have experienced frequent power outages, which disrupt digital activities and impair effective involvement of parents in education through digital means (Mirata et al. 2020). Households in rural areas or in low-income communities do not possess devices such as smartphones, tablets or computers that are required for consistent interaction with school platforms. One of the participants remarks that *"we try to schedule meetings at flexible times or send printed notices, but poverty is a real obstacle."* In some homes, devices may be shared among multiple family members, making it difficult for parents to regularly check school announcements, monitor academic progress or communicate with teachers on regular basis. In some instances, parents may have access to a digital device, they are often faced with internet connectivity issues. Unstable or unaffordable internet connectivity further restricts parents' abilities to participate in school activities. Problems such as the high cost of data, weak network coverage in rural areas and frequent power outages make it challenging for parents to access online materials, join virtual meetings or engage with teachers. A teacher participant stated that "most parents are supportive but simply cannot afford to attend meetings or buy data, which then compromises parental participation in school activities". As a result of these challenges, technology which is supposed to bridge the communication gaps between parents and school is now compromised by these challenges, leaving some parents disengaged from school activities and unable to provide timely academic support to their children and school.

4.2.2 Low level of digital literacy among parents

Low level of digital literacy among many parents especially those from older generations or with limited formal education is another challenge defeating digital participation of parents in education. As the world delves into the digital era, the necessity to bridge the digital divide has become more apparent and urgent (Tahmasebi, 2023). The current era requires the prevalence of digital parenting, which refers to parents' efforts and practices to understand support and regulate children's activities in digital space (Barnes & Potter, 2020). Low level of digital literacy is a barrier for digital parenting. Even when digital devices and internet connectivity are available, parents may struggle to navigate school platforms, interpret digital feedback or use educational software effectively. Actions such as logging into school portals, downloading assignments and memos, checking progress reports or participating in online meetings can pose significant challenges to parents who are not digitally literate.

The challenge of parents unable to execute the digital functions signifies the importance of digital literacy as a fundamental skill in education (Anthonysamy et al., 2020). Digital literacy is the ability to use information and communication technologies to find, evaluate, create and transmit information as required (Shalavin, 2018). As most rural parents are digitally illiterate, they are thus unable to implement digital parenting. Given this technological era where everyone seems to be digitally literate, some parents may also fear making mistakes on digital systems or feel embarrassed to ask for help, leading them to disengage themselves from school communication platforms entirely. This digital skill gap even becomes more complicated if login credentials to digital platforms requires a sophisticated password combining numbers, letters and characters that parents with very low level of education may not be able to cope with or take cognisance.

Low digital literacy reduces parents' ability to monitor academic performance of their children, communicate concerns to teachers or guide their children in the use of educational technologies.

Given the sensitive nature of technology use among children, digital literacy among parents is key as children mostly require supervision when comes to the use of technology (Selwyn & Odabaşı, 2017). Parents need to take the leading role in guiding children's use of technological tools (Preradovic et al., 2016). Even though parents should supervise children's use of technology, parents' attitudes towards the use of technology, data security and child safety may differ, depending on parents' socio-economic status, cultural orientation, age and educational backgrounds (Durak & Kaygin, 2020). All these factors may contribute to parents' digital literacy levels and their willingness to engage in digital communication or assist their children digitally. Nevertheless, it is important for parents to act consciously and correctly about digital security to provide better education for their children and make the future safer (Akman et al. 2023). Consequently, children whose parents lack digital skills receive less academic support at home despite the availability of digital tools and internet connectivity. Overall, technological limitations such as inadequate access to digital tools and low digital literacy impair parental involvement in education. The impact of these limitations is most common in rural communities where the parent population is less educated, and provision of technological facilities is minimum.

5. IMPLICATIONS OF THE FINDINGS TO POLICIES AND PRACTICE

School management and leadership practices should focus on strategies for engaging parents with low literacy in technologies. Policies should require teacher training institutions to integrate community engagement and inclusive communication strategies into their curricula, enabling teachers to build trust and collaboration with all parents, regardless of their socio-economic status and literacy levels. In practice and given the technological threats facing parents, teachers should be trained to use simple, accessible language when communicating with parents, employ alternative communication methods such as printed newsletters or phone calls to reach parents who cannot access digital platforms. This inclusive approach ensures that every parent remains informed and involved in the education of their children.

Schools are required to offer workshops and training sessions to help parents use digital tools effectively. Parents in rural communities have limited exposure to and experience with technology. As a result, lack of training on technologies and low technological literacy among parents can defeat the effective use of technology by parents. Given the increasing reliance on technology for communication and learning, schools should take a leading role in empowering parents with basic digital literacy skills for easy communication. Such training sessions can teach parents how to navigate educational platforms, access online progress reports, communicate digitally with teachers and school administrators, and how to act ethically on digital platforms. Parents need to be oriented to digital data security and ethical use of digital platforms.

Mark and Nguyen (2017) emphasised that teachers and parents must work together in digital data security, this will help children gain digital citizenship skills effectively given the support from both home and school (Hollandsworth et al., 2011). Given that teachers' digital literacy and digital data security awareness levels are higher than those of parents, it is important for teachers to strengthen this cooperation and to manage it effectively through continuous digital training

initiatives (Akman, 2023). Such training initiatives bridge the digital divide between home and school, fostering stronger parental involvement and collaboration between teachers and parents. Given the social nature of schools, local technological companies could partner with schools for them to provide user-friendly training sessions to parents, ensuring that parents from all backgrounds are empowered and able to support their children's learning in digital environments.

The Ministry of Education in collaboration with technological companies are required to improve infrastructure such as internet connectivity and network coverage to rural areas to bridge the digital divide between rural and urban schools. In this regard, the Ministry of Education should prioritise investments in digital infrastructure, particularly in rural communities. Provision for reliable internet connectivity, sufficient digital devices and consistent electricity supply are prerequisites for integrating technology effectively into teaching and learning, particularly in rural communities. Therefore, there is a need to allocate targeted funding to expand connectivity and provide subsidised digital resources to disadvantaged schools and communities. Improved infrastructure will facilitate online learning and enhance communication between teachers, learners and parents, ultimately narrowing the gap between urban and rural schools.

6. CONCLUSION

This study has demonstrated that digital tools play a significant role in promoting parental involvement in children's education, especially in rural communities. The findings confirm that technologies such as mobile messaging platforms, learning management systems and online communication portals offer parents greater convenience and access to engage with schools, improved interaction with teachers and increased oversight of their children's learning progress. Digital tools strengthen the school and home relationship and empower parents to engage more meaningfully in academic support and decision-making processes. Digital technologies bridge longstanding gaps in educational engagement in rural settings.

Despite the potential of technology in revolutionalising parental involvement in education, the study highlights on-going barriers that continue to undermine equitable parental participation. Many parents in rural communities face significant challenges, including limited access to digital devices, low levels of digital literacy and the increasing cost of data. These obstacles are further compounded by unreliable internet connectivity, which restricts consistent communication with schools, thus undermining the benefits that digital platforms can offer to parents. Without addressing these technological barriers, the advantages of digital tools risk benefiting only a few families, thereby reinforcing existing educational inequalities rather than reducing them.

The findings underscore the need for targeted interventions aimed at strengthening the enabling environment for technology-supported parental involvement among rural schools. Policymakers, educational institutions and community leaders must collaborate to expand digital infrastructure in rural areas, subsidise the cost of connectivity and provide ongoing digital-literacy training for parents. By addressing these challenges, education systems can fully harness the power of digital tools as catalysts for inclusive and active parental engagement in schools. Ultimately, bridging the digital divide is essential for ensuring that all parents regardless of location or socio-economic status, can participate meaningfully in the educational journeys of their children.

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