



Listening from the Margins: A Phenomenological Inquiry into Parents' Lived Experiences of School Involvement in Rural Philippine Communities

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Abstract

Parental involvement is widely acknowledged as a critical factor in promoting children's educational success. However, existing frameworks often conceptualize involvement using school-centered standards that fail to capture parents' lived experiences, particularly in rural and underserved communities. This study explored the lived experiences of parents regarding their involvement in their children's schooling in rural Philippine communities. Using a qualitative phenomenological approach through Interpretative Phenomenological Analysis (IPA), semi-structured interviews were conducted with eleven purposively selected parents and primary caregivers of school-aged children enrolled in public schools. The interview data were analyzed following established IPA procedures to identify shared meanings and patterns across participants' narratives. Three themes emerged from the analysis: being there but not being seen, reflecting parents' experiences of feeling present yet unheard within school settings; carrying educational responsibility despite limitations, highlighting parents' sacrifices and home-based support despite socioeconomic and geographical challenges; and wanting a genuine partnership with the school, emphasizing parents' desire for respectful, collaborative, and inclusive relationships with educators. The findings suggest that parental involvement extends beyond participation in school activities and should be understood as a relational and context-dependent experience shaped by structural realities and cultural expectations. The study highlights the need for schools to adopt more inclusive, flexible, and context-sensitive approaches that recognize parents as valued partners in children's education.

Keywords

Parental involvement; lived experiences; Interpretative Phenomenological Analysis; rural Philippine communities; school-family partnership

How to Cite

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Ethics Statement

This study was conducted in accordance with ethical standards.

INTRODUCTION

Parental involvement has long been recognized as an important contributor to children's educational development and academic success. Across educational systems, parents are encouraged to participate in school activities, communicate with

teachers, monitor learning at home, and collaborate with schools to support their children's educational progress. However, contemporary scholarship argues that dominant models of parental involvement often rely on school-centered definitions that privilege visible forms of participation, such as attendance at meetings and compliance with school expectations, while overlooking parents' lived realities and diverse ways of supporting their children's learning (Jacobs, 2024; Yulianti et al., 2022). These traditional approaches position schools as the primary authority in determining what constitutes meaningful involvement and often fail to recognize how cultural norms, socioeconomic conditions, and power relations shape parents' experiences and opportunities for engagement. Emerging evidence suggests that parental involvement should be understood within broader social and contextual realities. In under-resourced communities, limited participation in formal school activities is frequently associated not with parental disinterest but with structural barriers, including poverty, demanding work responsibilities, geographic isolation, and restricted access to educational resources (Manilal & Jairam, 2023; Careemdeen, 2024). Research conducted in the Philippines similarly demonstrates that families possess valuable forms of family capital that influence educational engagement, although these contributions often remain unrecognized within formal school structures (Jabar et al., 2023). Parents have also been found to assume substantial academic and caregiving responsibilities despite competing demands at home and work, particularly during periods of educational disruption (Budhrani et al., 2021; Bayod & Bayod, 2020). The educational disruptions experienced in recent years further highlighted the importance of family support and adaptive learning practices, emphasizing that educational recovery is strongly influenced by the collaborative efforts of schools and families (Willis et al., 2025).

The experiences of rural families are often shaped by vulnerabilities that extend beyond educational settings. Social support networks and community relationships play a critical role in helping families navigate institutional systems and access needed services, particularly among low-income populations (Luu et al., 2022). Likewise, children left behind due to parental migration encounter unique circumstances that alter patterns of caregiving and parental engagement, requiring schools to adopt more flexible and responsive approaches to family involvement (Dominguez & Hall, 2022). These realities suggest that parental involvement cannot be examined independently of the broader social conditions in which families live and function. Educational institutions that fail to recognize these contextual influences risk interpreting constrained participation as parental disinterest rather than as a consequence of structural disadvantage.

Although schools implement programs intended to strengthen home-school partnerships through meetings, orientations, and communication initiatives, these efforts do not always result in authentic collaboration or shared decision-making. Parents frequently occupy passive roles characterized by attendance rather than meaningful participation (Levinthal et al., 2021). Consequently, scholars increasingly advocate for more relational and equitable approaches that recognize parents as knowledgeable partners whose experiences and perspectives can enrich educational processes (Ebrahim et al., 2023; Eden et al., 2024). Such approaches are particularly relevant in rural contexts, where culturally responsive and community-based educational practices are necessary to address local realities and promote educational equity (Marongwe & Mutesasira, 2024; Animachie et al., 2025). Leadership also plays a significant role in shaping inclusive school cultures. Educational leaders who recognize the identities, experiences, and strengths of stakeholders are better positioned to cultivate environments that encourage collaboration and shared responsibility (Baldera, 2025). Despite growing international interest in family engagement, much of the existing literature has focused on institutional frameworks, school-led initiatives, and educators' perspectives (Jacobs, 2024; Yulianti et al., 2022). Comparatively fewer studies have examined how parents themselves interpret and experience involvement in their children's schooling, particularly within rural and marginalized communities. Phenomenological and narrative inquiries have demonstrated the importance of understanding how individuals construct meaning from lived experiences and negotiate identities within sociocultural contexts (Maravilla, 2020; Vo et al., 2025). Recent studies further emphasize that the identities and positionalities of educators influence how they interact with families and make decisions within educational settings, ultimately shaping opportunities for inclusion and participation (Kheirkhah et al., 2026). In the Philippine context, cultural values, social hierarchies, and communal relationships influence how individuals navigate institutional spaces and express agency (Anacin, 2015; Del Castillo, 2022; Kibiten, 2019). Ventura et al. (2026) similarly highlighted how individuals' lived experiences and interactions with institutions shape their ability to understand, negotiate, and access support systems, underscoring the importance of listening to community voices when designing responsive interventions.

Given these gaps, there remains limited understanding of how parents in rural Philippine communities make sense of their involvement in their children's education. Existing research provides insufficient insight into how parents experience inclusion, silence, recognition, or exclusion within school contexts. Exploring these experiences is essential for developing more contextually responsive and socially just approaches to family engagement. Therefore, this study employed Interpretative Phenomenological Analysis (IPA) to investigate the lived experiences of parents in rural Philippine communities regarding their involvement in their children's schooling. By foregrounding parents' voices, the study seeks to contribute a more human-centered understanding of school-family relationships and generate insights that may inform inclusive educational policies, culturally responsive practices, and equitable partnerships between schools and families.

METHODOLOGY

Design

This study employed Interpretative Phenomenological Analysis (IPA), a qualitative approach that explores how individuals understand and give meaning to their lived experiences. IPA was deemed appropriate because the study sought to examine how parents in rural Philippine communities perceive and interpret their involvement in their children's schooling. Guided by the principles of phenomenology, hermeneutics, and idiography, the approach allowed the researcher to gain an in-depth understanding of parents' experiences while acknowledging the interpretative nature of the analysis.

Locale

The study was conducted among parents residing in selected rural communities in Negros Oriental Province, Philippines. These communities are characterized by limited access to educational resources, transportation challenges, and socioeconomic constraints that influence school participation. Rurality was determined based on the communities' distance from urban centers and the limited availability of educational and social support services. The settings were purposively selected because parents in these communities often encounter circumstances that shape their involvement in their children's education differently from those in urban areas.

Participants

Eleven (11) parents and primary caregivers of school-aged children enrolled in public schools participated in the study. Participants were selected through purposive sampling to ensure that they had direct experiences related to school involvement. To qualify for inclusion, participants had to be residing in a rural community, actively involved in their child's education in any form, and willing to share their experiences through in-depth interviews. The small sample size was considered appropriate for IPA, which emphasizes detailed examination of individual experiences rather than broad generalization.

Collection

Data were gathered through semi-structured interviews using an interview guide consisting of open-ended questions. The interviews focused on parents' experiences of participating in school activities, their interactions with teachers and school personnel, challenges encountered in supporting their children's education, and their perceptions of meaningful parental involvement. Interviews were conducted in participants' preferred language and lasted approximately 45 to 60 minutes. With the participants' consent, all interviews were audio-recorded and transcribed verbatim. Transcripts prepared in local languages were translated into English while preserving the intended meanings expressed by the participants.

Given the interpretative nature of Interpretative Phenomenological Analysis, reflexivity was practiced throughout the research process. The researcher, who is affiliated with the Department of Education, acknowledged that prior professional experiences and assumptions regarding parental involvement could influence data interpretation. To address this, reflexive notes were maintained during data collection and analysis to critically examine emerging assumptions and ensure that participants' accounts remained central to the analytic process.

Ethical Considerations

Prior to data collection, ethical clearance and necessary permissions were secured from appropriate authorities. Participants were informed of the purpose of the study, the voluntary nature of their participation, and their right to withdraw at any point without consequence. Written informed consent was obtained from all participants. To ensure confidentiality and anonymity, pseudonyms were used in place of participants' real names, and all research records were securely maintained.

Data Analysis

The interview transcripts were analyzed following the procedures of Interpretative Phenomenological Analysis described by Smith et al. (2009). The researcher repeatedly read the transcripts to become familiar with the data and recorded initial observations and reflections. Emerging themes were then identified from each participant's account and clustered into broader categories based on similarities and connections. Patterns across cases were subsequently examined to generate superordinate themes that captured the shared meanings of parental involvement among participants. Throughout the analytic process, reflexive notes and an audit trail were maintained to document analytical decisions and enhance the transparency of the study. Participants were also given opportunities to verify the accuracy of their responses and the interpretations drawn from their narratives to strengthen the credibility of the findings.

RESULTS AND DISCUSSION

The Analysis of the interview transcripts generated three interconnected themes that describe how parents in rural Philippine communities understand and experience involvement in their children's schooling. These themes were: (1) Being There but Not Being Seen, (2) Carrying Educational Responsibility Despite Limitations, and (3) Wanting a Genuine Partnership with the School. Collectively, the findings suggest that parental involvement extends beyond attendance in school activities and should be understood as a relational, emotional, and context-dependent experience shaped by cultural expectations, socioeconomic realities, and school structures.

1. Being There but Not Being Seen

Parents described school involvement as an experience characterized by physical presence but limited recognition. While they attended meetings and complied with school requirements, many felt that their participation rarely translated into having a voice in school matters. One parent shared, "When I go to meetings, I have to, but most of the time I listen. My views are not really wanted; just to be there." Another participant remarked, "We just nod when teachers talk because we do not want to seem rude, even if we have questions." Feelings of inadequacy and hesitation were also evident, as one mother expressed, "I am just a mom from the country, so I do not think my thoughts matter." These accounts reveal that parents often interpret involvement as fulfilling obligations rather than engaging in collaborative dialogue. Their silence reflects not indifference but an awareness of social boundaries and unequal relationships within school spaces.

The findings support critiques of conventional parental involvement frameworks that privilege compliance and attendance over authentic participation. School-centered definitions often determine what counts as involvement based on institutional expectations, thereby overlooking parents' lived experiences and perspectives (Jacobs, 2024). Although schools initiate programs designed to increase parental participation, such initiatives do not always foster reciprocal communication or shared decision-making (Yulianti et al., 2022). Parents' experiences in this study likewise reflect concerns about agency,

as involvement remained largely shaped by school authority rather than partnership. Similar observations were reported by Ebrahim et al. (2023), who argued that parents should be recognized as active agents capable of contributing valuable insights rather than passive recipients of school directives. The findings suggest that power relations embedded within educational settings may unintentionally silence parents, particularly those from marginalized and rural communities.

These experiences highlight the importance of creating school environments where parents feel acknowledged and respected. Schools must move beyond viewing parental involvement merely as attendance at meetings or compliance with requests. Instead, teachers and school leaders should intentionally cultivate spaces that encourage dialogue, validate parents' contributions, and reduce feelings of intimidation. Strategies such as parent consultation sessions, participatory decision-making processes, and open communication channels may foster trust and confidence among families. When parents perceive that their voices matter, involvement becomes a shared endeavor rather than an imposed responsibility.

2. Carrying Educational Responsibility Despite Limitations

Participants consistently portrayed supporting their children's education as a moral obligation that persisted despite economic hardship, demanding work schedules, and logistical barriers. One participant explained, "I help my child at night even when I am tired from work." Another parent shared, "I cannot always attend school events because I have to work, but that does not mean I do not care about my child's education." Distance from school also emerged as a recurring challenge. As one participant noted, "Our house is far from the school, but I always remind my child to study because that is the only thing I can do for them." These narratives reveal that parents continuously support their children's education through acts of sacrifice, encouragement, and perseverance, even when such efforts remain invisible within formal school settings.

The findings affirm previous studies indicating that parental engagement extends beyond direct participation in school activities. Parents in under-resourced communities often provide support through home-based involvement, emotional encouragement, and daily guidance rather than frequent physical presence at school (Manilal & Jairam, 2023). Family engagement also reflects culturally embedded expressions of care and responsibility that may not align with institutional expectations (Morales-Alexander, 2021). In the Philippine context, family capital significantly influences how parents navigate educational responsibilities despite socioeconomic constraints (Jabar et al., 2023). Filipino parents have likewise been shown to assume substantial academic and caregiving roles while balancing work and household demands (Budhrani et al., 2021; Bayod & Bayod, 2020). These findings challenge deficit assumptions that equate limited attendance at school functions with disinterest in children's education. Instead, they reveal the resilience and commitment that characterize parental involvement in rural settings.

The educational implications of these findings call for a broader and more inclusive understanding of parental involvement. Schools should recognize that meaningful support often occurs within the home and under circumstances that differ from idealized models of engagement. Flexible schedules for parent activities, alternative communication platforms, and acknowledgment of diverse forms of participation may help reduce barriers faced by rural families. By appreciating parents' efforts beyond visible school participation, educational institutions can foster more equitable partnerships and avoid unintentionally marginalizing families with limited resources.

3. Wanting a Genuine Partnership with the School

Despite the challenges they encountered, parents expressed a sincere desire to establish meaningful and respectful relationships with schools. Beyond fulfilling obligations or attending school activities, they wished to be recognized as partners whose experiences and knowledge of their children could contribute to educational decisions. One participant shared, "I want teachers to hear us too because we know our children better than they do." Another parent stated, "We will not be afraid to speak if schools welcome us and explain things clearly." Others envisioned a future in which parents no longer felt intimidated by school environments, as reflected in the statement, "I hope that one day parents will not feel small when they walk into school and will instead feel like they belong there." These narratives reveal that parents aspire to relationships grounded in trust, mutual respect, and shared responsibility. They do not reject involvement; rather, they seek opportunities to participate in ways that affirm their dignity and acknowledge their contributions to their children's learning.

The findings are consistent with studies emphasizing the relational nature of effective school-family partnerships. Collaborative engagement emerges when schools move beyond hierarchical structures and recognize families as co-educators in children's development (Levinthal et al., 2021). Meaningful parental involvement requires educational institutions to value parents' perspectives and create opportunities for genuine participation in educational processes (Eden et al., 2024). Equitable partnerships have likewise been identified as essential in promoting educational inclusion and social justice, particularly among marginalized communities whose voices are often overlooked (Marongwe & Mutesasira, 2024). Furthermore, culturally responsive practices that recognize local knowledge and community experiences strengthen trust and enhance school-community relationships (Anlimachie et al., 2025). The participants' accounts reinforce the notion that parents possess valuable insights regarding their children's strengths, needs, and aspirations, and these insights should be integrated into educational practice rather than treated as secondary to professional expertise.

These findings suggest that schools must intentionally cultivate cultures of partnership and belonging. Teachers and school leaders should receive professional development on family engagement strategies that emphasize empathy, active listening, and culturally responsive communication. Schools may also institutionalize mechanisms that encourage shared decision-making, such as parent advisory groups, collaborative planning sessions, and regular feedback consultations. Creating welcoming spaces where parents feel respected and valued can transform involvement from a procedural expectation into a meaningful relationship characterized by trust and reciprocity. When parents are empowered to participate as partners rather than spectators, schools become more responsive to community realities and better positioned to support children's holistic development.

Synthesis

Taken together, the three themes illustrate that parental involvement in rural Philippine communities is a multidimensional experience shaped by structural realities, interpersonal relationships, and deeply held values about education. Parents described being physically present yet emotionally unheard, carrying substantial educational responsibilities despite numerous constraints, and aspiring toward authentic partnerships with schools. These experiences challenge narrow definitions of involvement that rely solely on visible indicators such as attendance at meetings or participation in school events. Instead, the findings reveal that parental engagement encompasses acts of sacrifice, emotional investment, resilience, and the pursuit of recognition within educational spaces. The study further demonstrates that parents' experiences cannot be understood independently of the contexts in which they occur. Economic limitations, geographical barriers, cultural expectations regarding authority, and institutional practices influence how parents navigate their involvement and how they interpret their roles within the school community. While existing frameworks often position parents according to the extent of their observable participation, the present findings suggest that many forms of involvement remain hidden within homes and everyday interactions. Recognizing these realities invites a more nuanced understanding of family engagement that acknowledges diversity in parental circumstances and expressions of support. The findings call for a shift from school-centered models of parental involvement toward approaches grounded in partnership, inclusivity, and social justice. Schools that value parents' voices, recognize home-based contributions, and foster collaborative relationships may be better equipped to address the needs of learners in rural communities. By listening to parents from the margins, educational institutions can develop practices that are not only more responsive and equitable but also reflective of the shared commitment of families and schools to children's success.

Conclusion and Recommendations

This phenomenological inquiry revealed that parental involvement in rural Philippine communities is a multifaceted experience shaped by recognition, responsibility, and relationships. Parents viewed their involvement not simply as attending school activities but as an enduring commitment to their children's education expressed through sacrifice, encouragement, and guidance despite financial difficulties, work obligations, and geographical barriers. The findings showed that many parents often felt present yet unheard within school spaces, while their home-based efforts remained largely unrecognized. At the same time, they expressed a strong desire to be regarded as genuine partners in their children's education. These experiences challenge narrow, school-centered definitions of parental involvement and underscore the importance of understanding engagement within the realities of rural family life.

In light of these findings, schools are encouraged to adopt more inclusive and context-sensitive approaches to family engagement by creating opportunities for meaningful dialogue and shared decision-making with parents. Educational leaders and teachers should recognize and value diverse forms of parental involvement, including those occurring at home, and implement flexible and culturally responsive strategies that address barriers experienced by rural families. Future studies may further explore parental involvement among other marginalized populations and incorporate the perspectives of teachers, school administrators, and learners to provide a more comprehensive understanding of school-family partnerships in the Philippine context.

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