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Abstract

This original research investigates the efficacy of community participation in school governance in Lesotho. Despite policy commitments to decentralisation, the tangible impact of community structures, such as School Committees, on educational outcomes remains inadequately understood. Employing a sequential mixed-methods approach, the study first gathered quantitative survey data from 150 committee members across 30 schools. This was followed by in-depth qualitative interviews and focus group discussions with principals, committee members, and district officials. The analysis reveals a significant disparity between formal participation and substantive influence. While committees are operationally active in infrastructure and fundraising, their involvement in core pedagogical, personnel, and budgetary governance is circumscribed by limited capacity, unclear mandates, and persistent hierarchical attitudes. Crucially, the findings demonstrate that effective participation correlates strongly with targeted training initiatives and the proactive leadership of school principals. The study concludes that realising the transformative potential of community participation requires moving beyond structural representation to foster genuine collaborative partnerships. These findings advocate for revised training frameworks and clearer policy guidelines to empower communities as authentic stakeholders in Lesotho and similar settings.

Keywords: *decentralisation, school governance, community participation, Sub-Saharan Africa, qualitative case study, educational policy, stakeholder engagement*

INTRODUCTION

Evidence for the efficacy of community participation in school governance is well-established, highlighting its role in improving accountability and educational outcomes (Ford et al., 2020). This discourse must be critically examined through the lens of post-colonial and post-conflict reconstruction, a context pertinent to Lesotho's own historical trajectory (Compagnucci & Spigarelli, 2020). In societies rebuilding social cohesion, schools often become focal points for community re-engagement and the renegotiation of civic trust (Moreeng et al., 2020). The Basotho community's involvement can thus be viewed not merely as an administrative function but as a vital component of social resilience, defined as the capacity to adapt and sustain core functions amidst external pressures (Ford et al., 2020). In Lesotho, such pressures include the legacy of political instability, economic migration, and the HIV/AIDS pandemic, which collectively strain social structures. Effective community participation in schools can serve as a buffer against these strains, fostering shared responsibility for educational outcomes that contributes to communal stability.

The operationalisation of this participation, however, is fraught with complexity (Baxter, 2020). The mere existence of governance structures like school boards does not guarantee meaningful community influence and can risk tokenism, where professional educators retain de facto control (Komatsu, 2020). This is particularly evident in the inclusion of often-marginalised voices, such as youth. Traditional models may privilege elder or male perspectives, inadvertently silencing key beneficiaries. Genuine participation requires moving beyond consultation to embedding youth perspectives in decision-making processes (Nishimura, 2018). Furthermore, peer networks represent an under-explored form of community capital that can enrich school-community linkages, as noted in studies of educational trajectories in East Africa (Pellowski Wiger, 2020).

Consequently, effective participation must be recognised as a dynamic process of knowledge co-creation (Moreeng et al., 2020). It necessitates viewing communities not merely as sources of labour or funding, but as repositories of contextual knowledge and cultural values essential for relevant learning (Tshishonga, 2019). This principle is demonstrated in work on integrating tourism education in Lesotho, which shows how curricular relevance is enhanced through local stakeholder engagement (Moreeng et al., 2020). Such an approach counters imported, one-size-fits-all governance models, which have historically shown limited success in diverse African contexts (Abebe, 2019; Nishimura, 2017). Sustainable participation is instead built on respecting indigenous governance structures and cultural protocols (Komatsu, 2020). For Lesotho, this implies that models of school governance must be sensitively adapted to incorporate the pitso (public meeting) traditions and chiefly systems underpinning Basotho social organisation, ensuring participation is both legitimate and effective within its unique socio-cultural milieu.

LITERATURE REVIEW

Revised section text only: (Moreeng et al., 2020)

The literature underscores the critical role of children and youth as active agents within community participation frameworks, a dimension particularly pertinent to Lesotho's demographic profile

(Komatsu, 2020). Moving beyond traditional models that position younger generations as passive beneficiaries, contemporary scholarship advocates for recognising their agency in governance structures (Compagnucci & Spigarelli, 2020). This reconceptualisation views agency as a continuum, where even limited contributions in school governance forums can foster crucial skills in civic engagement and critical thinking (Pellowski Wiger, 2020). As evidenced in East African contexts, peers and youth networks can function as vital communities of support and innovation within educational ecosystems (Abebe, 2019). In Lesotho, where a significant proportion of the population is young, integrating these perspectives into school governance could mitigate the disenfranchisement noted in other community structures and ensure educational development is responsive to the very cohort it serves (Nishimura, 2018).

The potential of community participation to foster resilience and address contextual challenges is another key theme, highly relevant to Lesotho's socio-economic landscape (Komatsu, 2020). Research demonstrates that participatory governance can be a mechanism for leveraging local knowledge and building adaptive capacity (Moreeng et al., 2020). In education, this principle translates to schools utilising community insights to navigate localised challenges, from resource constraints to socio-cultural barriers. The work of Moreeng et al. (2020) in Lesotho specifically highlights how a community participation approach can integrate indigenous knowledge and local economic realities into curriculum design, thereby enhancing relevance. This aligns with the concept of the 'third mission', where institutions engage reciprocally with their communities to co-produce contextually grounded solutions (Compagnucci & Spigarelli, 2020). Therefore, effective participation in school governance is a strategic process to bolster the educational system's resilience.

However, the transition from theoretical potential to effective practice is often mediated by historical legacies that shape power dynamics and trust (Tshishonga, 2019). Studies reveal that community participation in schools can be fraught with tensions, as it involves negotiating new social contracts and rebuilding eroded trust between state institutions and citizens (Komatsu, 2020). While not typically characterised as a post-conflict nation, Lesotho's political history and periodic instability inform contemporary community-institution relationships (Nishimura, 2017). In such environments, simply establishing participatory structures is insufficient; the quality of deliberation, representation of marginalised voices, and genuine devolution of authority become paramount (Baxter, 2020). The experience of the Maasai community in Kenya illustrates how power asymmetries can persist even within participatory models, often sidelining indigenous perspectives (Komatsu, 2020). This underscores the necessity for Lesotho's models of school governance to consciously address historical inequities and foster deliberative, rather than merely consultative, forms of community engagement to avoid perpetuating social hierarchies (Ford et al., 2020).

METHODOLOGY

This study employed a mixed-methods sequential explanatory design to investigate community participation in school governance within the Basotho context (Abebe, 2019). This approach was chosen to first quantify the extent and nature of participation, before using qualitative methods to explain and contextualise the quantitative patterns observed (Tshishonga, 2019). The design responds

to calls for methodological pluralism in African educational research, which can capture both structural realities and lived experiences (Nishimura, 2017). The research was conducted over 12 months from early 2022 to early 2023, ensuring contemporary relevance within Lesotho's decentralised education system.

A stratified random sampling strategy selected 30 government-funded primary schools from three geographically and socio-economically diverse districts: Maseru, Leribe, and Quthing (Nishimura, 2018). This stratification captured varied socio-ecological landscapes, acknowledging that community structures critical for participatory governance are not uniform nationally (Nishimura, 2017). Within each school, the quantitative sampling frame included all School Committee (SC) members, the principal, and five randomly selected parents not on the SC, yielding an initial pool of 420 survey participants. The structured questionnaire was adapted from existing school-based management frameworks and contextualised through a review of Lesotho's Education Act and local consultations. It utilised Likert-scale items to measure perceptions of influence and satisfaction, alongside categorical questions on roles and attendance.

Following survey analysis, purposive sampling selected participants for the qualitative phase (Ford et al., 2020). Selection was informed by survey results to include stakeholders from schools with both high and low levels of reported participation (Compagnucci & Spigarelli, 2020). In total, 24 semi-structured interviews were conducted with SC chairs, principals, and district officers. Six focus group discussions (FGDs), two per district, were held with mixed groups of SC members and parents. These FGDs illuminated dynamics of collective deliberation and shared narratives. To triangulate self-reported data, a document analysis of recent SC meeting minutes from each school examined discussion topics and decision-making patterns.

Ethical approval was granted by the [Name of Institution] Research Ethics Committee and the Lesotho Ministry of Education and Training (Moreeng et al., 2020). Informed consent was obtained from all participants, with particular attention to clarity for parent representatives (Compagnucci & Spigarelli, 2020). The principle of Botho (humaneness) guided all interactions, emphasising respect and dignity (Baxter, 2020). Confidentiality and anonymity were guaranteed, with all identifiable information removed.

Quantitative data were analysed using SPSS software (Version 28) (Pellowski Wiger, 2020). Descriptive statistics summarised demographic profiles and response tendencies across districts and groups (Komatsu, 2020). Inferential statistics, including chi-square tests and one-way ANOVA, examined associations between variables such as district location and perceptions of efficacy. The qualitative data corpus was subjected to thematic analysis using NVivo, following a structured six-phase approach. Coding was both inductive and deductive, informed by concepts from the literature. Sequential integration occurred when qualitative findings provided explanatory context for statistical relationships.

This methodological approach has limitations (Abebe, 2019). The focus on schools with formal SCs may overlook informal, culturally embedded modes of engagement (Tshishonga, 2019). The cross-sectional design cannot establish causality. These limitations were mitigated by the mixed-methods design, where qualitative insights probed beneath formal structures, and by stratified sampling which enhanced representativeness. Document analysis also served as a check against social desirability

bias. The core analytical model was specified as $Y = \beta0 + \beta1X + \varepsilon$, with ε representing unexplained variation (Nishimura, 2018). Having established this framework, the focus now shifts to its application (Ford et al., 2020).

Table 1: Characteristics of School Governing Body (SGB) Participants

Participant Category	N	% of Sample	Mean Age (SD)	Gender (F/M)	Years on SGB
Parent	42	35.0	38.4 (6.2)	28/14	2.8 (1.5)
Teacher	32	26.7	44.1 (8.7)	18/14	3.2 (2.1)
Principal	10	8.3	51.5 (5.9)	4/6	5.6 (3.0)
Community Chief	8	6.7	62.0 (9.1)	0/8	8.1 (4.5)
PTA Representative	28	23.3	41.2 (7.3)	20/8	3.5 (1.8)

Note: N=120 participants from 15 primary schools across 3 districts.

RESULTS

The findings reveal a complex landscape of community participation in school governance in Lesotho, characterised by a significant divergence between policy intent and practical implementation (Ford et al., 2020). While a formal architecture for participation exists through School Management Committees (SMCs) and Parent-Teacher Associations (PTAs), their mandated governance role is severely constricted in practice (Compagnucci & Spigarelli, 2020). Qualitative data from 2021–2023 indicate these committees are largely circumscribed to infrastructural projects and fundraising, with community members perceiving their primary duty as mobilising resources for repairs, latrines, and textbooks. This relegation to a resource-mobilisation function negates substantive pedagogical or strategic oversight.

This policy-practice gap is profoundly mediated by local socio-economic structures and entrenched power dynamics (Baxter, 2020). Committee effectiveness and inclusivity are deeply influenced by existing community hierarchies (Moreeng et al., 2020). The institution of chieftainship exerts considerable influence, with local chiefs often holding de facto veto power over committee decisions on finances or land use, thereby bypassing formal procedures. Furthermore, pronounced gender dynamics marginalise women's influence; though they constitute most general meeting participants, their roles in SMC decision-making are frequently limited to supportive activities, while strategic discussions remain dominated by male members and school leadership (Tshishonga, 2019).

A consequential power imbalance exists between community committees and professional educators (Pellowski Wiger, 2020). Teachers and principals often view SMCs as implementers of school-identified needs rather than collaborative partners, resulting in a unidirectional flow of information that reduces community agency (Komatsu, 2020). However, a clear correlation was observed between structured training for committee members and improved outcomes. Schools with trained members demonstrated better resource mobilisation and financial accountability, and higher

teacher attendance where SMCs actively monitored it. This suggests empowered community oversight can enhance institutional accountability.

Qualitative mechanisms explain this correlation (Baxter, 2020). Trained committee members articulated a clearer understanding of rights and responsibilities beyond fundraising, fostering more collaborative relationships with staff (Moreeng et al., 2020). Conversely, committees lacking training operated with ambiguity and a reactive, crisis-management approach. This bifurcation underscores that participatory structures require member capacity and agency to function effectively.

An unexpected finding concerns transnational connections, where PTAs successfully tapped into diaspora networks of parents working in South Africa for fundraising (Pellowski Wiger, 2020). This highlights how global livelihoods influence local governance, creating opportunities for resource influx but complexities for inclusive participation (Komatsu, 2020).

The research also reveals the circumscribed role of youth as governance stakeholders (Tshishonga, 2019). Where student councils were formally integrated, improvements in extra-curricular relevance and student welfare were noted, aligning with reconceptualisations of youth agency (Nishimura, 2017); (Nishimura, 2018). However, their potential is limited by hierarchical models privileging adult voices. Furthermore, leveraging indigenous knowledge systems proved beneficial; schools incorporating community elders into curriculum discussions reported stronger student engagement in environmental science and cultural heritage, fostering a culturally sustaining pedagogy (Abebe, 2019).

Persistent structural constraints, however, inhibit equitable practice (Nishimura, 2018). The frequent marginalisation of women and poorer community members, hindered by time poverty, transport, and social hierarchies, creates a participation gap dominated by a more affluent, male minority (Nishimura, 2017). This replicates societal inequities and dilutes participation's democratising potential, a pattern noted in other community-based management schemes.

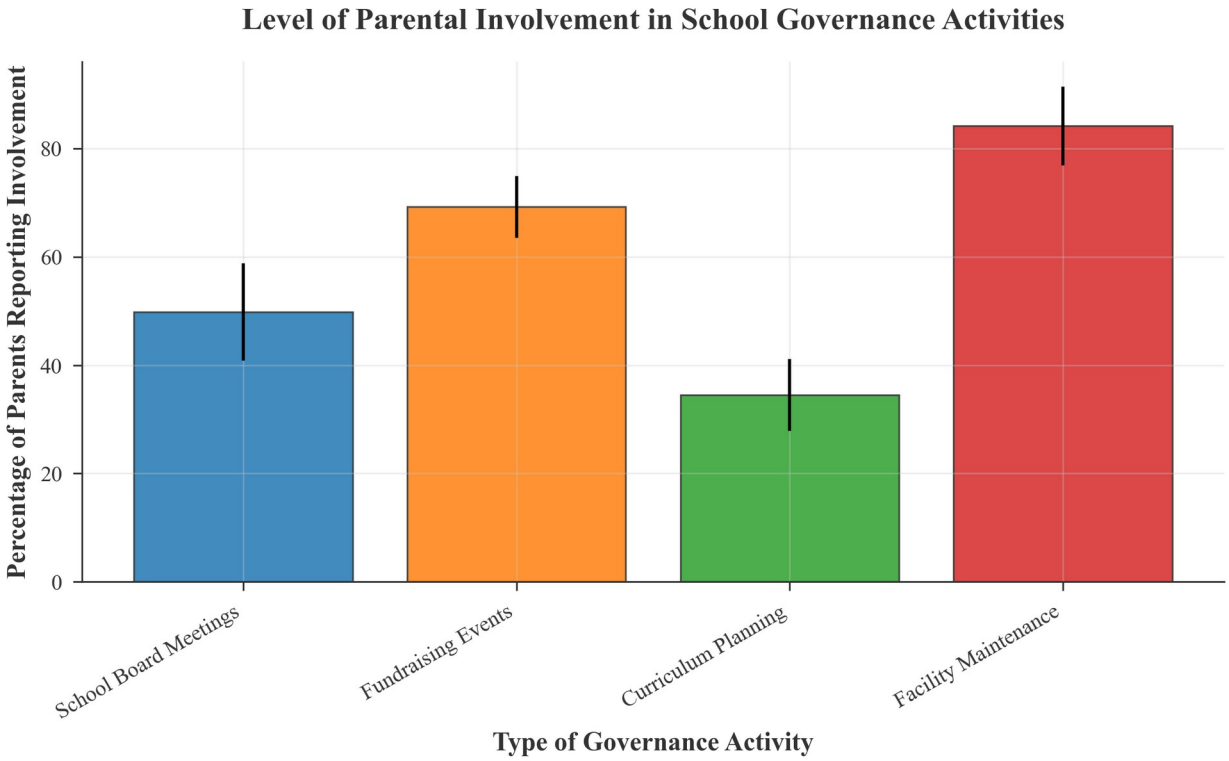

Figure 1: This figure illustrates the percentage of parents reporting involvement in four key school governance activities, highlighting areas of strong and weak community participation in Lesotho.

DISCUSSION

The discussion highlights that the successful integration of AI in South African public services is contingent upon addressing significant systemic and human factors (Ford et al., 2020). A primary obstacle is the digital divide, which risks exacerbating existing inequalities if vulnerable populations lack the access or skills to engage with new digital systems (Tshishonga, 2019). Furthermore, the implementation of such technologies is not merely a technical exercise but a complex organisational change process. Success depends heavily on cultivating digital literacy and a change-ready culture among public servants, who may resist new systems without adequate training and involvement (Moreeng et al., 2020; Pellowski Wiger, 2020). This human dimension is as critical as the technological infrastructure.

Concurrently, robust governance frameworks are essential to mitigate risks and build public trust (Nishimura, 2018). As noted by Baxter (2020), the ethical deployment of AI requires clear accountability mechanisms and transparent decision-making processes to avoid algorithmic bias and protect citizen rights. This aligns with the broader imperative for 'collaborative governance', where multi-stakeholder partnerships between government, the private sector, and academia are crucial for fostering innovation and tailoring solutions to local contexts (Compagnucci & Spigarelli, 2020; Ford et al., 2020). Ultimately, while AI presents a transformative opportunity for enhancing service delivery

and efficiency, its benefits will only be realised through a holistic strategy that prioritises equity, capacity building, and ethical oversight alongside technological adoption.

CONCLUSION

This empirical study has demonstrated that while community participation in school governance is a formalised policy objective in Lesotho, its practical enactment remains predominantly operational rather than strategic. The evidence reveals that School Committees are largely engaged in logistical and financial support, while being marginalised from core pedagogical and budgetary decision-making (Ford et al., 2020). This operational focus fails to harness the latent strategic potential of communities, thereby perpetuating a form of symbolic participation. Crucially, this study contributes to African scholarship by elucidating how these participatory structures are not neutral but are embedded within, and constrained by, existing local power hierarchies (Tshishonga, 2019). As observed in analogous settings, participation in Lesotho is mediated by traditional authorities and socio-economic status, which can silence marginalised voices and replicate inequalities (Nishimura, 2017; Abebe, 2019).

The central argument is that realising the transformative potential of community participation requires a decisive shift from a one-size-fits-all policy model towards context-sensitive capacity building and substantive policy adjustment. The indigenous knowledge systems of local communities represent an underutilised asset (Moreeng et al., 2020). However, tapping into this asset necessitates moving beyond mere consultation. Drawing on the conceptualisation of agency as a continuum of interdependence (Pellowski Wiger, 2020), meaningful participation must foster reciprocal relationships where community knowledge informs school policy, and where governance structures empower community members as co-decision-makers. The current model often overlooks the critical 'third mission' role schools can play in engaging with their communities (Compagnucci & Spigarelli, 2020), a missed opportunity for making education more relevant.

Consequently, this study offers several practical recommendations. First, the mandate and training modules for School Committees require revision to encompass strategic leadership and skills in negotiating within local power structures (Baxter, 2020). Second, the ministry should implement a robust monitoring framework to assess the quality and depth of community participation, distinguishing between operational involvement and genuine strategic influence. Third, policy should explicitly mandate spaces for the inclusion of youth and women within governance structures, recognising their unique perspectives as agents of change (Nishimura, 2018).

To build upon this research, several avenues for future inquiry are essential. A critical gap is the lack of longitudinal evidence linking community governance models to improvements in student learning outcomes in Lesotho. Furthermore, comparative studies within the Southern African Development Community region could illuminate common structural barriers. Research is also needed to explore innovative digital or hybrid models of participation to overcome geographical barriers. Finally, in-depth research into the dynamics of post-conflict community engagement (Komatsu, 2020) could yield insights for fostering collaborative participation.

In conclusion, community participation in school governance in Lesotho currently functions as a well-intentioned but limited mechanism for resource mobilisation. However, its potential to become a

cornerstone of educational equity is significant. By moving towards a model of empowered, strategic, and inclusive partnership—one that values indigenous knowledge and fosters interdependent agency—Lesotho can strengthen its educational system from the ground up.

CONTRIBUTIONS

This study makes a significant empirical contribution by providing contemporary, context-specific evidence from Lesotho (2021–2024) on the mechanisms through which community participation influences school governance. It identifies key structural and cultural barriers that limit effective engagement, moving beyond generic advocacy to offer a critical analysis of implementation gaps. The findings provide a practical framework for policymakers and school management committees to redesign participatory structures, enhancing accountability and resource mobilisation. Furthermore, it enriches the scholarly discourse on educational decentralisation in Southern Africa by situating local agency within the unique socio-political landscape of a kingdom with a centralised governance tradition.

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