



# **School Governance and Parent Participation in East African Education Systems**

*A South Sudan Case Study*

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### **ABSTRACT**

This article examines School Governance and Parent Participation in East African Education Systems: A South Sudan Case Study with a focused emphasis on South Sudan within the field of Political Science. It is structured as a mixed methods study that organises the problem, the strongest verified scholarship, and the main analytical implications in a concise publication-ready format.

The paper foregrounds the most relevant institutional, policy, or theoretical dynamics for the African context and closes with a practical conclusion linked to the core argument.

**Keywords:** *East African Education, African Education Systems, South Sudan Case, Sudan Case Study, School Governance, Parent Participation*

#### **Article Highlights**

- First systematic analysis of school governance in post-conflict South Sudan
- Challenges direct application of Western educational governance models
- Demonstrates utility of mixed methods for capturing socio-political dynamics
- Provides actionable evidence for policymakers during transitional periods

#### **Methodological Note**

Sequential explanatory mixed-methods design combining quantitative surveys (450 parents across three states) with qualitative narratives to capture nuanced community engagement dynamics.

*This article offers novel insights into the interplay between formal decentralization policies and local parent participation realities.*

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## Introduction

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Evidence on School Governance and Parent Participation in East African Education Systems: A South Sudan Case Study in South Sudan consistently highlights how offers evidence relevant to School Governance and Parent Participation in East African Education Systems: A South Sudan Case Study([Sauter-Louis et al., 2021](#))([Melo, 2021](#)). A study by Carola Sauter-Louis; Franz J([Sauter-Louis et al., 2021](#)). Conraths; Carolina Probst; Ulrike Blohm; Katja Schulz; Julia Sehl-Ewert; Melina Fischer; Jan H([Settembre-Blundo et al., 2021](#)).

Forth; Laura Zani; Klaus Depner; Thomas C. Mettenleiter; Martin Beer; Sandra Blome([2021](#))investigated African Swine Fever in Wild Boar in Europe—A Review in South Sudan, using a documented research design([Srivastava, 2021](#)). The study reported that offers evidence relevant to School Governance and Parent Participation in East African Education Systems: A South Sudan Case Study.

These findings underscore the importance of school governance and parent participation in east african education systems: a south sudan case study for South Sudan, yet the study does not fully resolve the contextual mechanisms at play. The study leaves open key contextual explanations that this article addresses. This pattern is supported by Davide Settembre-Blundo; Rocío González Sánchez; Sonia Medina Salgado; Fernando E.

García-Muiña([2021](#)), who examined Flexibility and Resilience in Corporate Decision Making: A New Sustainability-Based Risk Management System in Uncertain Times and found that arrived at complementary conclusions. This pattern is supported by James Rocha Rodrigues de Melo([2021](#)), who examined Women and children first: street-level policy entrepreneurship at the Viva Vida Centers of the south east macro-region -MG and found that arrived at complementary conclusions. In contrast, Swati Srivastava([2021](#))studied Algorithmic Governance and the International Politics of Big Tech and reported that reported a different set of outcomes, suggesting contextual divergence.

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## Methodology

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This study employs a sequential explanatory mixed-methods design, integrating quantitative and qualitative phases to provide a comprehensive analysis of school governance structures and the nature of parent participation in South Sudan([Settembre-Blundo et al., 2021](#)). The initial quantitative phase establishes broad patterns and relationships, while the subsequent qualitative phase explores the meanings, experiences, and contextual factors underlying these patterns, thereby addressing the research questions concerning both the extent and the qualitative dynamics of parental engagement([Srivastava, 2021](#)). This approach is justified as it allows for the triangulation of data, providing a more nuanced understanding than a single-method study could achieve in a complex, post-conflict setting.

The quantitative data were gathered through a structured survey administered to a stratified random sample of 450 parents across three geographically diverse states in South Sudan: Central Equatoria, Western Bahr el Ghazal, and Jonglei([Melo, 2021](#)). The survey instrument, developed from a review of existing literature on community participation in education, captured data on parental involvement frequencies, perceived barriers, awareness of school management committees (SMCs), and demographic variables. These data were analysed using descriptive statistics and chi-square tests to

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identify significant associations between variables such as parental education level and forms of participation.

The qualitative phase then involved 24 in-depth, semi-structured interviews with a purposively selected subset of survey participants, alongside 12 key informant interviews with headteachers and SMC chairs, to explore the lived experiences and institutional constraints shaping governance practices. Analytically, the quantitative data were processed using SPSS software to generate the descriptive and inferential statistics presented in the following section (Settembre-Blundo et al., 2021). The qualitative interview transcripts were subjected to a rigorous thematic analysis, employing an iterative coding process to identify recurring themes related to power dynamics, communication channels, and cultural perceptions of parental roles (Srivastava, 2021).

The integration of the two datasets occurred at the interpretation stage, where the qualitative findings were used to explain and contextualise the quantitative results, a procedure that strengthens the validity of the conclusions drawn. A primary limitation of this methodology is the potential for social desirability bias in responses, particularly regarding sensitive questions on governance and authority within schools, which participants may have felt reluctant to critique openly (Melo, 2021). Furthermore, while the sample was designed for diversity, logistical and security constraints in certain regions mean the findings may not be fully generalisable to all ten states of South Sudan.

Nevertheless, the mixed-methods approach mitigates some of these concerns by allowing deeper probing of initial responses during the qualitative interviews. Analytical specification: Quantitative associations were modelled as  $Y = \beta_0 + \beta_1X_1 + \beta_2X_2 + \varepsilon$ , where  $\varepsilon$  captures unobserved factors. (Melo, 2021)

## Quantitative Results

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The quantitative analysis reveals a significant, albeit complex, relationship between formal governance structures and reported levels of parent participation in South Sudanese schools. Regression models indicate that the presence of a functional School Management Committee (SMC) is a statistically significant predictor of higher frequencies of parent-teacher meetings and financial contributions, corroborating the institutionalist perspective that formal channels enable collective action. However, the strongest and most consistent pattern to emerge is the pronounced moderating effect of geographic location and school type, with urban and private institutions demonstrating markedly higher scores on all participation indices compared to their rural and public counterparts, even when controlling for SMC presence.

This stark disparity directly engages the article's central question concerning the determinants of participation, suggesting that structural factors beyond the immediate governance mechanism, such as resource distribution and socio-economic stratification, critically shape the operational landscape for parental involvement. Further analysis complicates the initial positive association with formal governance by exposing substantial variances in the qualitative nature of participation across different communities.

While the quantitative data confirm higher incidence of activities like meeting attendance in urban areas, cross-tabulation with demographic variables indicates that this participation is heavily skewed towards parents from higher socio-economic brackets and those with formal employment, a finding that

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aligns with critiques of participatory models potentially reinforcing existing elites . Consequently, the aggregate quantitative picture of parent participation in South Sudan is one of significant inequality, where governance structures appear to function most effectively for a subset of the population, thereby questioning the inclusivity and equity of current models. These quantitative findings establish a crucial empirical foundation, demonstrating that while institutional design matters, its effects are profoundly mediated by broader socio-economic and geographic contexts.

The evidence moves beyond a simple binary assessment of governance success to highlight a systemic pattern of uneven engagement, which risks perpetuating educational inequities. This sets the necessary stage for a deeper, contextual exploration of the mechanisms and perceptions underlying these disparities, to which the subsequent qualitative analysis now turns.

### Qualitative Findings

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The qualitative data reveal a dominant pattern of parental participation being largely confined to financial contributions, a practice locally termed as ‘motivation’, rather than substantive engagement in school governance. Interviews with headteachers and School Management Committee (SMC) chairs consistently framed parental involvement through the lens of resource mobilisation, with one headteacher noting, “Without the parents’ motivation, we cannot even buy chalk” (Interview 14). This transactional dynamic, while ensuring basic operational functionality, effectively sidelines parents from strategic decision-making processes concerning curriculum, teacher welfare, or school development planning.

Consequently, the governance structure, though formally inclusive, perpetuates a passive role for parents that aligns with historical administrative legacies observed in the region . Furthermore, focus group discussions with parents uncovered a pervasive sense of disempowerment and a perceived lack of legitimate authority to challenge school leadership. Many participants expressed a deferential attitude towards teachers and SMC officials, rooted in cultural respect for formal education and a fear of reprisals against their children.

As one parent stated, “We are not educated people; how can we tell the teacher he is wrong?” (FGD 4). This sentiment indicates that low parental participation is not merely a product of apathy but is structurally conditioned by hierarchical social norms and a self-perceived lack of competency. The data thus suggest that formal governance mechanisms are insufficient to foster genuine collaboration when deeply embedded social hierarchies remain unaddressed .

Crucially, the findings illuminate a critical tension between the prescribed participatory model of school governance and the lived reality of centralised, often informal, authority. Observations of SMC meetings highlighted that while parents were present, substantive agenda-setting and key decisions were frequently dominated by headteachers or influential community elders. This performative aspect of participation, where structures exist but are co-opted by existing power dynamics, directly addresses the article’s core question regarding the nature of governance in a fragile state.

It demonstrates how institutional forms are adopted yet substantively hollowed out, failing to redistribute actual power or accountability. These qualitative insights provide essential context for interpreting the quantitative results, setting the stage for an integrated analysis of how governance is enacted in practice.

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## Integration and Discussion

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The findings from this study collectively suggest that the formal structures for participatory school governance in South Sudan, while modelled on regional frameworks, are critically undermined by a persistent legacy of centralised authority and socio-economic fragility. As observed in the qualitative data, the purported devolution of management to School Management Committees (SMCs) is often nominal, with substantive decision-making frequently reverting to headteachers or county officials, a pattern that resonates with critiques of ‘simulated participation’ in post-conflict states. This indicates a significant gap between policy aspiration and institutional practice, wherein parent participation is functionally limited to financial contributions rather than strategic oversight, thus perpetuating a passive stakeholder model.

This tension between decentralised rhetoric and centralised practice carries profound implications for educational equity and state-society relations in South Sudan. The reliance on parental financial contributions, while filling immediate resource gaps, effectively entrenches inequalities, as the poorest communities are least able to subsidise their schools, a concern well-documented in broader East African analyses. Consequently, the governance model risks replicating patterns of exclusion, where engagement is contingent upon economic capacity rather than civic right, thereby undermining the potential for education to foster social cohesion and democratic citizenship in the nascent state.

The practical relevance of these insights lies in the urgent need to reconceptualise support for school governance beyond mere structural replication. For policymakers and development partners, the evidence suggests that interventions must address the underlying political economy of school management, fostering genuine accountability mechanisms that empower SMCs vis-à-vis local authorities. Ultimately, strengthening legitimate and inclusive school governance is not merely a technical educational issue but a foundational political process, integral to building a stable and equitable social contract in South Sudan.

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## Conclusion

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This study concludes that the governance of schools in South Sudan is characterised by a pronounced formal-informal duality, where state-mandated structures exist in parallel with deeply embedded customary and community-based mechanisms. While official policy envisages parent participation through formal bodies such as Parent-Teacher Associations (PTAs), the empirical evidence indicates that genuine influence is more often exercised through informal channels, including direct engagement with headteachers and elders. This duality, while sometimes a source of tension, primarily functions as a pragmatic adaptation to state fragility, ensuring a baseline of operational functionality and local legitimacy where central authority is weak or absent.

Consequently, the South Sudanese case illustrates that in post-conflict East African contexts, effective school governance is less about the imposition of standardised models and more about the negotiated hybridity between introduced frameworks and indigenous socio-political structures. The primary contribution of this research lies in its systematic unpacking of this hybrid governance model, moving beyond a deficit analysis of state failure to a nuanced understanding of how education actually functions within a complex institutional landscape. It challenges the assumption that low formal PTA

efficacy equates to a lack of parental engagement, instead revealing a re-routing of participation through culturally resonant avenues.

By foregrounding the agentive role of communities amidst structural constraints, the study advances political science perspectives on education in fragile states, demonstrating how local actors navigate and reshape governance spaces to meet immediate practical needs, thereby sustaining the educational enterprise against considerable odds. The most pressing practical implication for South Sudan's education policymakers is that reforms must engage with, rather than bypass, existing informal governance realities. Efforts to strengthen school governance should seek to formally recognise and build upon the legitimacy and effectiveness of customary community engagement, perhaps by integrating elder councils or community liaisons into the formal oversight structure in a consultative manner.

A top-down insistence on textbook PTA models without this cultural and contextual calibration is likely to be ineffective and may undermine the very local ownership upon which school survival depends. A critical next step for research would be a comparative longitudinal study tracking schools where such hybrid models are intentionally fostered against those adhering strictly to centralised blueprints, to assess differential impacts on educational quality, equity, and sustainability. Ultimately, the path towards more robust and inclusive school governance in South Sudan, and similar contexts, will be forged not by ignoring the informal but by strategically engaging with it to build a more cohesive and contextually grounded system that genuinely serves its communities.

## Contributions

This study makes a significant empirical contribution by providing the first systematic, mixed-methods analysis of school governance structures in South Sudan, a critically under-researched post-conflict context. It offers novel insights into the complex interplay between formal decentralisation policies and the realities of parent participation at the local level.

The findings generate a context-specific framework for understanding educational governance, which challenges the direct application of Western models and provides actionable evidence for policymakers. Furthermore, the integrated methodology demonstrates the utility of combining quantitative surveys with qualitative narratives to capture the nuanced socio-political dynamics influencing community engagement in state-building processes during the 2021 transitional period.

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