

School, Family, and Community: A Strategic Alliance for Quality Education in Complexo Escolar 415 Francisco Ramos da Cruz (Sumbe, Cuanza-Sul Province, Angola)

Escola, Família e Comunidade: Uma Aliança Estratégica para a Promoção de uma Educação de Qualidade no Complexo Escolar 415 Francisco Ramos da Cruz (Sumbe, Província do Cuanza-Sul, Angola)

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Abstract

The relationship between school, family, and community is a decisive factor for quality education, particularly in developing contexts with limited institutional resources. This qualitative case study examines the school-family-community alliance at Complexo Escolar 415 Francisco Ramos da Cruz, Sumbe, Cuanza-Sul, Angola, drawing on Epstein's (2001) overlapping spheres model and Bronfenbrenner's (1979) ecological systems theory. Data were collected through semi-structured interviews and focus groups with 28 purposively selected participants (4 principals, 4 teachers, 20 parents/guardians). Thematic analysis (Braun & Clarke, 2006, 2022) identified four themes: communication as the foundation of partnership, community participation as a catalyst for educational improvement, and leadership as a mediating force. Findings show a shared commitment to educational quality, yet participation remains asymmetric and largely informal. The study proposes strategic recommendations for institutionalising inclusive and participatory governance structures in Angolan primary schools.

Keywords: school-family-community partnership; parental involvement; quality education; Angola.

Resumo

A relação entre escola, família e comunidade constitui um dos principais fatores para a promoção de uma educação de qualidade, particularmente em contextos de desenvolvimento marcados por recursos institucionais limitados. Este estudo de caso qualitativo analisa a aliança entre escola, família e comunidade no Complexo Escolar 415 Francisco Ramos da Cruz, localizado no município do Sumbe, Província do Cuanza-Sul, Angola. Ancorado no modelo das esferas de influência sobrepostas de Epstein (2001) e na teoria dos sistemas ecológicos de Bronfenbrenner (1979), o estudo recolheu dados através de entrevistas semiestruturadas e grupos focais com 28 participantes seleccionados intencionalmente, incluindo 4 directores escolares, 4 professores e 20 pais/encarregados de educação. A análise temática, realizada segundo Braun e Clarke (2006, 2022), permitiu identificar quatro temas centrais: a centralidade da comunicação, a participação comunitária como catalisadora da melhoria educativa, as barreiras estruturais e socioeconómicas, e a liderança como força mediadora. Os resultados indicam que, embora exista um compromisso partilhado com a qualidade educativa, a participação permanece assimétrica e predominantemente informal. O estudo conclui com recomendações estratégicas para a institucionalização de estruturas de governação participativa e inclusiva nas escolas primárias angolanas.

Palavras-chave: parceria escola-família-comunidade; envolvimento parental; educação de qualidade; Angola.

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Introduction

Education is widely recognised as a fundamental human right and a cornerstone of sustainable development. In sub-Saharan Africa, particularly in Angola, ensuring equitable access to quality education remains a major challenge, shaped by decades of civil conflict, post-war reconstruction, socioeconomic inequalities, and the uneven distribution of educational resources (UNESCO, 2021; World Bank, 2022). Within this context, schools cannot respond effectively in isolation; achieving quality education requires the active and coordinated involvement of families and communities.

The importance of school-family-community partnerships is well established in the educational literature. Epstein's (2001) framework of six types of involvement - parenting, communicating, volunteering, learning at home, decision-making, and collaborating with the community - has been particularly influential. Similarly, Bronfenbrenner's (1979) ecological systems theory situates the child's development within interlocking layers of social influence, underscoring the indispensability of family and community contexts. Empirical studies by Henderson and Mapp (2002), Sheldon (2009), and Epstein and Sheldon (2023) have empirically demonstrated that meaningful parental and community involvement is positively correlated with student achievement, school attendance, and the overall quality of the educational environment.

In the Angolan context, Law No. 17/16 - the Education Base Law - formally recognises the responsibility of families and communities in the educational process. However, the translation of this legal framework into everyday school practice remains inconsistent, particularly at the level of primary and lower-secondary schools in provincial urban centres such as Sumbe (Ministry of Education of Angola, 2016). Despite this legal recognition, empirical research on school-family-community partnerships in Angola remains limited, particularly studies based on local case-study evidence.

This study addresses this gap by examining the strategic alliance among school, family, and community at Complexo Escolar 415 Francisco Ramos da Cruz, Sumbe, Cuanza-Sul Province. The study is guided by the following research questions:

RQ1: What forms and mechanisms characterise the school-family-community partnership at Complexo Escolar 415?

RQ2: What factors facilitate or hinder effective participation by families and communities in school life?

RQ3: What strategies could strengthen this alliance in support of quality education?

1. Literature Review and Study Context

1.1. Conceptual Frameworks of Partnership in Education

The concept of school-family-community (SFC) partnership has evolved since the foundational work of Gordon (1968), who established that parents serve as irreplaceable partners in children's educational development, and Coleman (1987), whose notion of social capital highlighted the role of trust and network relationships in educational outcomes. Epstein (2001) operationalised this theoretical base into a comprehensive six-type involvement model - encompassing parenting, communicating, volunteering, learning at home, decision-making, and community collaboration - adopted by education ministries and school systems worldwide. Her core argument - that schools, families, and communities form overlapping spheres of influence - provides the conceptual scaffolding for the present inquiry. More recently, Mapp and Bergman (2021) refined this framework through the Dual Capacity-Building Framework (Version 2), emphasising that both educators and families must simultaneously develop the skills and conditions for meaningful co-engagement.

Drawing on sociocultural theory, Vygotsky (1978) emphasised that learning is inherently embedded in social interaction; the community of learners extends well beyond classroom walls. This perspective suggests that schools should be understood not merely as educational institutions, but as actors embedded within a broader social ecology. In the African context, this resonates with the Ubuntu philosophy - 'I am because we are' - which has been applied to educational governance to argue for collective, communitarian responsibility for child development (Asante, 1998; Chilisa, 2012, 2022; Ndofirepi, 2021). Mkosi et al. (2023) similarly demonstrate that integrating Ubuntu values into teaching and learning strengthens the sense of shared responsibility between schools and the communities they serve, reinforcing the relevance of this framework to the present study.

1.2. Evidence on the Impact of Family and Community Involvement

A substantial body of quantitative and qualitative research demonstrate the positive impact of family and community engagement on educational quality. Henderson and Mapp (2002), in a comprehensive research synthesis of over 50 studies, found consistent

associations between parental involvement and higher student achievement across socioeconomic groups. These findings have been reinforced by subsequent work, including Sheldon and Epstein (2022), who provided updated evidence that targeted family engagement strategies produce measurable improvements in student attendance and academic performance. Fan and Chen (2001) similarly found that parental aspirations and expectations exert a stronger influence on academic performance than direct behavioural involvement. A recent systematic review by Hidajat et al. (2026), synthesising evidence from 37 studies on family-school partnerships and student attendance, further extends Epstein's framework by highlighting the role of parental agency and relational quality, alongside formal involvement structures, in sustaining engagement.

In African educational contexts, the evidence is more nuanced. Studies from Tanzania (Sumra & Rajani, 2006), South Africa (Heystek, 2011), and Mozambique (Castiano, 2014) document both the potential and the limitations of community participation in school governance. More recent regional evidence (Muscarà et al., 2023; Phiri & Mkwanaenzi, 2023; Ogwu & Okorie, 2022) confirms that while community engagement yields positive learning outcomes, it is consistently mediated by socioeconomic conditions, gendered norms, and the quality of school leadership. Common barriers include socioeconomic precarity, low levels of parental education, language barriers, and asymmetric power relations between school management and community members - all of which are highly relevant to the Angolan provincial setting.

1.3. The Angolan Educational Context

Angola has made significant progress in expanding access to education following the cessation of the civil war in 2002. Gross enrolment rates at the primary level rose from approximately 60% in 2002 to over 90% by 2019, driven by large-scale infrastructure investment and teacher training programmes (UNICEF Angola, 2020; Ministry of Education of Angola, 2023). Nevertheless, educational quality - measured by learning outcomes, school completion rates, and teacher effectiveness - remains a persistent challenge (World Bank, 2022, 2024; UNICEF & UNESCO, 2024). More recent evidence confirms this picture. UNICEF's (2025) annual report documents persistently high levels of learning poverty and estimates that approximately 3.8 million children remain out of school nationally. The Government's National Learning Assessment (2022–2023) further

shows that only 37% of Grade 4 students could locate explicit information in a text, while just 14% of Grade 6 students successfully performed metric conversions.

Cuanza-Sul Province, where Sumbe is located, is characterised by a mixed urban-rural population, a predominantly informal economy, and limited access to higher educational resources. In this context, the principal, teachers, and parents at Complexo Escolar 415 operate under significant material and institutional constraints, making the strengthening of school-family-community partnerships not merely an academic concern but a practical necessity.

2. Methodology

2.1. Research Design

This study adopts a qualitative, interpretive case study design (Yin, 2018; Merriam, 2009). Case study methodology is particularly suited to investigating complex social phenomena within their natural context, allowing for rich, contextualised understanding of how and why specific dynamics unfold. The bounded case study - a single school complex - enables depth of analysis while acknowledging that findings may yield transferable insights applicable to analogous settings in Angola and the wider region.

2.2. Research Site

Complexo Escolar 415 Francisco Ramos da Cruz is a public primary and lower-secondary school complex located in the municipal seat of Sumbe, the capital of Cuanza-Sul Province, Angola. The school serves a diverse urban population, operating within the curriculum framework established by the Angolan Ministry of Education. It comprises multiple school buildings (escolas) functioning under a single administrative complex, led by a principal director and supported by sectoral directors. The school was selected on the basis of accessibility, administrative cooperation, and its representative socioeconomic profile.

2.3. Participants

A total of 28 participants were recruited through purposive sampling to ensure representation across the three key stakeholder groups: school leadership

(principals/directors), classroom teachers, and parents/guardians. Table 1 provides a demographic summary of the study participants.

Table 1. Demographic Profile of Study Participants - Complexo Escolar 415 Francisco Ramos da Cruz, Sumbe, Cuanza-Sul, Angola

Participant Group	Total (n)	Male	Female	Age Range	N
School Principals	4	3	1	30–46 years	4
Teachers	4	4	0	25–35 years	4
Parents/Guardians	20	10	10	30–40 years	20
Total	28	17	11	25–46 years	28

School principals included the Director Geral (overall principal) and three sectoral directors responsible for different school buildings within the complex. The four teachers were selected from those available during the data collection period. The 20 parents were recruited through the school's parent-teacher association, ensuring diversity in terms of gender, occupation, and educational background.

2.4. Data Collection

Data were collected through two primary instruments, each serving a distinct purpose within the research design. Semi-structured, in-depth interviews were conducted individually with each of the four principals and each of the four teachers, allowing for detailed exploration of institutional perspectives on partnership practices, leadership roles, and perceived barriers to family engagement. The interview guide addressed four main dimensions: (a) forms and channels of communication with families; (b) perceived contributions of families and community members to school functioning; (c) institutional and personal barriers to collaboration; and (d) leadership practices perceived to facilitate or hinder partnership. Two focus group discussions (FGDs), each comprising ten parents, were used to capture collective, dialogical accounts of family and community experiences of engagement with the school - a format considered more appropriate for eliciting shared understandings and social norms among parents than individual interviews. The FGD guide covered three main themes: (a) parents' experiences of communication with the school; (b) forms and motivations of community participation in school life; and (c) perceived obstacles to greater involvement. Both guides were developed and validated through a pilot test with two school administrators not included in the main study. All data

were collected in Portuguese, the national language of Angola, and audio-recorded with participant consent.

Interviews lasted between 35 and 60 minutes; focus groups lasted approximately 75 to 90 minutes. Fieldwork was conducted over a period of four weeks. Researcher positionality was attended to through reflexive journaling and member-checking.

2.5. Data Analysis

Interview and focus group recordings were transcribed verbatim and subjected to thematic analysis following the six-phase framework of Braun and Clarke (2006, 2022): familiarisation, generating initial codes, searching for themes, reviewing themes, defining and naming themes, and producing the final analysis. Coding was carried out independently by two members of the research team using NVivo 12 software, following an initial round of open coding applied to a subset of transcripts to develop a preliminary codebook. Divergences in coding were discussed in joint coding meetings, and the codebook was iteratively refined until consensus was reached; disagreements that could not be resolved through discussion were adjudicated by a third member of the research team. Candidate themes were then reviewed against the full dataset to ensure internal coherence and clear distinction between themes before being finalised and named. To further ensure credibility, prolonged engagement, triangulation across participant groups, and member-checking were employed (Merriam, 2009; Yin, 2018). Ethical approval was obtained from the relevant institutional review board and the school complex administration.

The methodological procedures adopted sought to ensure the credibility, dependability, and trustworthiness of the findings.

3. Findings

Thematic analysis yielded four overarching themes concerning the school-family-community alliance at Complexo Escolar 415. Each theme is presented with illustrative evidence drawn from participants' accounts.

3.1 Theme 1: Communication as the Foundation of Partnership

Across all participant groups, communication emerged as the central theme underpinning school-family-community relationships. Principals consistently described communication as the primary vehicle through which collaboration was initiated. As the Director Geral noted:

Without dialogue, there is no partnership. We make every effort to call parents together at the beginning of each trimester, to explain the situation of the school, the problems, the needs. When parents understand, they respond.

Teachers echoed this sentiment, noting that direct communication with individual parents - rather than formal meetings - was often more effective in mobilising support for specific students. Parents, for their part, identified lack of information as a significant barrier, with several noting that they often learned of school events only informally through their children. This asymmetry in communication - flowing predominantly from school to family rather than bi-directionally - points to a structural imbalance that limits the depth of partnership.

These findings align with Epstein's (2001) emphasis on communicating as a distinct and fundamental type of involvement, and with research by Hornby and Lafaele (2011) and Hornby and Blackwell (2022) demonstrating that unidirectional communication reduces parental agency in educational settings. Goodall (2021) argues that sustainable family engagement requires schools to move beyond information-sharing towards genuine dialogue and shared decision-making. The COVID-19 pandemic reinforced this lesson globally, with Auerbach (2021) documenting how schools that had invested in reciprocal communication maintained stronger family connections even under crisis conditions.

3.2. Theme 2: Community Participation as a Catalyst for School Improvement

A second major theme concerned the tangible contributions made by community members to the functioning and improvement of the school. Principals and parents described informal community mobilisation efforts that had resulted in material improvements to the school's infrastructure, including the repair of classrooms, provision of cleaning materials, and construction of perimeter fencing. One female parent described a community-organised fundraising effort:

We organised ourselves - mothers and fathers - and raised money to repair the roof of a classroom. The school could not wait for the government. We could not leave our children studying under a leaking roof.

Such collective action, while admirable, also highlighted the extent to which community labour compensates for inadequate state provisioning. Principals recognised this dynamic with a mixture of gratitude and concern, noting that reliance on voluntary community contributions is unsustainable and places disproportionate burdens on economically precarious families. From a policy perspective, this finding underscores the need to distinguish between partnership as genuine co-governance and partnership as surrogate state provision - a distinction that Fontaine and Larivée (2021) identify as critical to sustainable community engagement models. Yull et al. (2021) similarly caution that community-based participation must be deliberately structured to avoid reproducing existing inequalities in the distribution of school responsibilities.

3.3. Theme 3: Structural and Socioeconomic Barriers to Engagement

A third theme that emerged consistently across participant groups involved the multiple barriers that constrain meaningful engagement. Socioeconomic factors were identified as primary obstacles: many parents worked in informal-sector occupations with irregular hours, making attendance at school meetings difficult. Low educational attainment among some parents was reported as a source of self-exclusion, with parents expressing reluctance to engage with school matters due to feelings of inadequacy. This pattern is consistent with Walker and Hoover-Dempsey's (2023) analysis of motivational barriers, which identifies parental role construction and self-efficacy as critical determinants of involvement. Tran and Pham (2023) similarly document how parental educational capital shapes the form and depth of academic socialisation in developing country contexts.

Gender dynamics also surfaced as a subtle but significant variable. Although the parent sample was evenly split by gender (10 male, 10 female), female parents - particularly mothers - reported a higher degree of day-to-day involvement in their children's schooling, while male parents tended to engage more in formal or collective settings such as parent meetings. The all-male composition of the teacher cohort and the

predominance of male principals (3 of 4) suggests the need for further reflection on gender parity in school leadership and its potential influence on school-family communication.

Spatial and infrastructural barriers were also noted: the physical distance between some families' residences and the school, combined with inadequate public communication infrastructure, reduced the reach of school notifications and meeting announcements.

3.4. Theme 4: Leadership as a Mediating Force

The fourth and most cross-cutting theme was the role of school leadership - particularly the Director Geral - as a mediating and mobilising force in the partnership. Participants consistently attributed the quality of the school-family-community relationship substantially to the disposition, interpersonal skills, and commitment of the principal. Teachers described principal support as essential to their own engagement with parents, and parents consistently referenced the principal's accessibility and openness as key motivators for their participation.

This finding resonates with a growing body of leadership research emphasising the relational dimensions of school leadership in resource-constrained contexts (Leithwood et al., 2008, 2022; Bush, 2013; Bush & Ng, 2024). In the Angolan context, where institutional trust in formal governance structures is often fragile, personal leadership credibility and community embeddedness appear to serve as critical substitutes for formal participatory mechanisms. Zuze and Leibbrandt (2022), in their comparative study of post-conflict states including Angola and Mozambique, specifically highlight the principal's relational authority as the primary driver of community engagement in settings where formal school governance structures remain weak.

4. Discussion

The findings reveal a complex picture of the school-family-community partnership at Complexo Escolar 415. On the one hand, there exists a palpable shared commitment to educational quality across all three stakeholder groups, manifested in communication efforts, community resource mobilisation, and individual engagement. On the other hand, this partnership remains largely informal, reactive, and uneven in terms of power, participation, and sustainability. This tension between aspiration and practice mirrors the broader findings of Epstein and Sheldon (2023), who argue that without deliberate

institutional scaffolding, SFC partnerships in under-resourced schools tend to revert to ad hoc, relationship-dependent arrangements.

The dominance of male leadership across both the principals and teacher groups — with no female teachers and only one female principal - represents a structural imbalance that warrants attention. It is important to note, however, that this pattern may reflect the characteristics of the purposive sample - in particular the availability and willingness of specific individuals to participate - rather than necessarily indicating the broader reality of school leadership and staffing in Angola or in Cuanza-Sul Province. This possibility is discussed further as a limitation in the concluding section. Research consistently demonstrates that gender-inclusive school leadership is positively associated with broader community engagement, particularly among female parents and guardians (Unterhalter, 2012; UNESCO, 2019; Unterhalter & Heslop, 2021). The UNESCO (2023) Global Education Monitoring Report further underscores that meaningful gender equity in education systems requires representation at the leadership level, not solely at the level of student enrolment. This concern is corroborated by more recent data: UNESCO's (2025) Gender Report notes a persistent 20-percentage-point gender gap in school leadership globally and finds that women hold only 16% of primary school principalships in francophone Africa, while Akinola and Naidoo (2024), in a qualitative study of female school leaders in South Africa, similarly document structural and cultural barriers that continue to constrain women's progression into school leadership roles. The homogeneity of the teaching staff in terms of gender also raises questions about role modelling and the school's capacity to fully represent its community.

The age profiles of the participants provide additional insights. The relatively young teaching staff (ages 25-35) suggests a workforce at an early stage of professional development, potentially requiring structured mentoring and professional community building. The principals (ages 30-46), by contrast, represent a range that includes both newer and more experienced leaders, providing opportunities for mentorship across the leadership team. Parents in the 30-40 age range are typically at a stage of high family responsibility, a factor that should inform the scheduling and format of engagement activities.

The findings support and extend Epstein's (2001) overlapping spheres model by suggesting that in contexts of resource scarcity, the overlapping spheres are driven less by

institutional design than by necessity and personal relationships. This suggests that theoretical frameworks developed in high-income contexts require careful contextualisation when applied to sub-Saharan African school settings.

5. Recommendations

Drawing on the findings of this study, the following recommendations are proposed for school leaders, education authorities, and policy-makers in Angola:

1. Formalise participatory governance structures: Establish a functioning, regularly meeting School Council (Conselho de Escola) with guaranteed representation from parents, community leaders, and teachers, as stipulated in Angolan education legislation.

2. Invest in two-way communication infrastructure: Introduce accessible, low-cost communication mechanisms (e.g., community notice boards, SMS alerts, parent WhatsApp groups) to ensure information flows bidirectionally and reaches all families. Evidence from SMS-based educational initiatives elsewhere in sub-Saharan Africa (Jordan et al., 2024) suggests that low-bandwidth, phone-based communication can meaningfully improve engagement even in infrastructure-constrained settings such as Sumbe.

3. Promote gender balance in teaching and school leadership: Develop targeted recruitment and retention strategies to attract qualified female teachers and encourage female leadership candidates, in alignment with national gender equity commitments.

4. Strengthen school leadership capacity: Provide structured professional development for principals focused on community engagement, distributed leadership, and participatory school management.

5. Develop context-sensitive family engagement strategies: Design family engagement programmes that account for the socioeconomic realities of families in Sumbe, including flexible scheduling, home-visit options, and community liaison roles.

Conclusion

This case study of Complexo Escolar 415 Francisco Ramos da Cruz provides empirical evidence that a strategic alliance between school, family, and community is both a lived reality and an ongoing aspiration within the context of provincial education in Angola. The findings indicate that communication, community participation, leadership, and the reduction of structural barriers constitute the key dimensions through which

effective partnerships are built. While the school demonstrates commendable capacity for community mobilisation, the sustainability and equity of this alliance depend on the establishment of more formal, inclusive, and institutionally supported mechanisms for stakeholder engagement.

This study has several limitations that should be considered when interpreting the findings. First, the case-study design and the purposive selection of a single school complex limit the generalisability of results to other Angolan school contexts, particularly rural settings with different socioeconomic and infrastructural profiles. Second, the relatively small sample size - especially among school principals (n=4) and teachers (n=4) - constrains the extent to which patterns identified, including the predominance of male leadership, can be interpreted as reflective of school leadership more broadly in Angola rather than as an artefact of the specific sampling frame and participant availability at this school complex. Future studies employing larger and more gender-diverse samples would help clarify whether this pattern is context-specific or indicative of a broader structural trend. Finally, reliance on self-reported interview and focus-group data may be subject to social desirability bias, and the four-week fieldwork period, while sufficient for this study's exploratory aims, limits insight into how the alliance evolves over time.

Although grounded in a single case study, the implications of these findings extend beyond Sumbe. Across Angola and the broader sub-Saharan African region, the imperative of building genuine school-family-community partnerships as a strategy for educational quality improvement is urgent and actionable. Future research should explore longitudinal outcomes of partnership interventions, the specific mechanisms through which female school leadership enhances community engagement, and the applicability of participatory governance frameworks to rural Angolan school contexts.

Strengthening school-family-community partnerships should therefore be understood not simply as an educational strategy, but as a shared social commitment to improving educational quality and fostering more inclusive and sustainable school communities.

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