

Parent-Teacher Synergy and Learner Success: Insights for Competency-Based Education in Kenya

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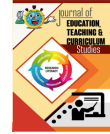


Abstract

This study explores the impact of parent-teacher collaboration on learner achievement within Kenya's Competency-Based Curriculum (CBC). Framed in both global and local contexts, it draws on current literature and original research conducted in Kenyan primary schools. A mixed-methods design was employed, integrating surveys and follow-up interviews. Quantitative data were analysed using descriptive statistics, while qualitative findings underwent thematic analysis. Methodological rigour was ensured through the use of a validated family-school relationship scale, internal consistency checks, triangulation, and member-checking. Findings highlight that active parental involvement is crucial to academic and social development. While many parents showed strong commitment, challenges such as limited curriculum familiarity, demanding work schedules, poor communication with schools, and negative past experiences inhibited full engagement. Notably, mothers made up two-thirds of participants, reflecting a gendered pattern in educational involvement. Despite high aspirations for their children, parents often felt unprepared to support CBC learning and deferred responsibility to teachers. The study connects these insights to broader frameworks, including Sustainable Development Goal 4 and Kenya's Vision 2030, emphasizing that reinforcing parent-teacher partnerships is vital to achieving inclusive, equitable, and quality education. The paper concludes with actionable recommendations for stakeholders to embed effective family-school collaboration into CBC implementation, addressing digital learning, community-based education, and support for learners with special needs.

Introduction

Education systems worldwide increasingly recognise that strong parent-teacher partnerships are vital for improving student outcomes and achieving holistic education goals (Epstein, 2023; UNESCO, 2022). Numerous studies over several decades confirm that when parents actively engage in their children's education, learners achieve better academic outcomes, exhibit enhanced social skills, and remain in school longer and for the required duration (Epstein, 2023; Mulinya & Kimotho, 2025). As early as the 1980s, research concluded and affirmed that "the evidence is now beyond dispute: parent involvement improves student achievement. When parents are involved, children do better in school, and they go to



better schools” (Epstein, 2023, p. 45). This has driven education reforms globally, embedding parental engagement as a core element of modern schooling and learning.

In many high-income countries, parental involvement is not only encouraged but also embedded in education policy and everyday school practice (cf. Masinde, Barasa & Mandillah, 2023). Developing nations are increasingly taking the same route, recognising that active parent participation can help bridge gaps in educational equity its provision (OECD, 2023; World Bank, 2022).

The global shift toward Competency-Based Education (CBE), which values the mastery and development of skills rather than rote memorisation, has further highlighted families’ central role as co-educators. Parents are now expected to create supportive home learning environments that reinforce what children learn in school, as posited by Darling-Hammond et al. (2022). Countries such as Finland, Australia, and the United States have institutionalised regular communication between schools and parents, using collaborative platforms to strengthen learning outcomes (OECD, 2023; Ferlazzo, 2023).

The COVID-19 pandemic made this partnership even more visible and paramount. As education shifted into homes, it exposed deep inequalities in parental preparedness, digital access, and household learning conditions (UNICEF, 2023; Reimers and Schleicher, 2022).

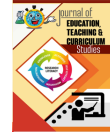
In Kenya, this need became especially evident with the introduction of the Competency-Based Curriculum (CBC) (now Competency-Based Education) in 2017, which replaced the long-standing 8-4-4 system. According to the Kenya Institute of Curriculum Development (KICD) (2019), the CBC framework identifies parental empowerment/engagement as one of its strategic pillars, as well as opportunity, excellence, inclusion and diversity, differentiated learning, and community-service learning.

However, research shows that many parents, especially in informal settlements and in rural areas, struggle to participate effectively. Mulinya and Kimotho (2025) found that although most parents are eager to be involved, they face barriers, including limited literacy, weak communication channels, and limited familiarity with CBC content.

Abuya (2017) prompts us that life skills are shaped both in school and at home, with parents playing a vital complementary role. Indeed, intervention studies in Nairobi have shown that when parents actively engage in conversations with their children, learning outcomes improve and risky behaviours decline, particularly among adolescents (Odongo et al., 2023).

Despite these positive examples, parental involvement in Kenya has often been narrowly defined as financial contributions to schools, primarily in the form of school fees, and, at best, as extracurricular fees (Mutua & Wanjiru, 2023). The Free Primary Education (FPE) initiative, launched in 2003 by the NARC government coalition, while expanding access, also placed new pressures on school resources, highlighting the need for more inclusive and holistic engagement models.

Recent policy efforts, including the formation of Parents Associations and the introduction of digital engagement tools (KICD, 2019), represent encouraging progress across the board. Persistent disparities in literacy, access to technology, and socioeconomic conditions continue to limit the extent to which parents can contribute to their children’s learning.



Theoretical Perspectives on Parent-Teacher Partnerships

Parental involvement in education is grounded in several theoretical models. Among the most influential models guiding research on parental engagement is Joyce L. Epstein's *Framework of Six Types of Involvement*, which views learning as occurring within overlapping spheres of school, family, and community (Epstein, 2007). The six forms of engagement include parenting (supporting children's growth and development at home), communicating (maintaining open two-way channels between home and school), volunteering, home learning, decision-making, and community collaboration. Each domain can be adapted to the school's unique context to strengthen learner outcomes.

Recent studies continue to validate the practical value of this framework. For instance, a study in Kisii County, Kenya, found a strong positive correlation between home-school communication and learners' acquisition of core competencies under the CBC (Obunga, Bitengo, and Mugo, 2025). Similarly, in Nakuru County, parental involvement across decision-making, volunteering, and home-based learning accounted for nearly 18 per cent of the adjustment in successful CBC implementation (Ranji, Chumba, & Kurgat, 2025). These findings echo earlier evidence that two-way communication (Type 2) and home learning reinforcement (Type 4) directly influence academic success (Ali et al., 2023).

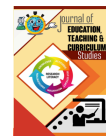
Epstein (2007) also stresses that opportunity alone does not guarantee meaningful participation as mindset matters. Schools must view parents as active partners in learning, not merely as funders or spectators in their children's learning. This insight aligns with Hoover-Dempsey and Sandler's Model (1997), which examines why and how parents engage in educational activities. Their model highlights three major psychological drivers: parents' role perception (seeing themselves as legitimate contributors to their child's education), their self-efficacy (believing they can help), and the invitations or signals of openness extended by schools.

Reinforcing these ideas, a 2024 international study found that parenting self-efficacy, the parents' belief in their capacity to influence learning, significantly predicts children's educational outcomes (Ma et al., 2024). Likewise, a 2022 meta-review of parental involvement research concluded that what matters most is *the* extent of parental engagement rather than the amount of involvement (Kim, 2022). In the Kenyan context, recent studies show that when parents are empowered and invited into genuine partnerships, both learner performance and holistic development improve (Gitonga, 2023; Kanyoi & Kirimi, 2025).

Impacts of Parent Involvement on Learner Success

The link between parental involvement and student achievement is robust. Meta-analyses consistently find positive correlations between parental engagement and improved grades, attendance, and social development (Jeynes, 2012; Fan & Chen, 2001; Castro et al., 2015). Benefits extend beyond academics, boosting motivation, self-esteem, and school attitudes (Goodall & Montgomery, 2014), all contributing to the holistic well-being of the learner.

Home-based involvement, such as reading together, discussions, and setting expectations, among others, has the strongest effect on achievement (Boonk et al., 2018; Castro et al., 2015). School-based involvement, like volunteering, supports relationship-building but is less directly linked to performance. Yet both are interconnected, as schools that foster communication often empower parents to be active at home (Mapp et al., 2014).



Parental socio-economic background also influences involvement in various ways. Educated, higher-income parents typically engage more, owing to both their capacity and school facilitation (OECD, 2023). Often, educated parents value education and want their children to succeed academically. The COVID-19 school closures exacerbated this disparity, as children of less educated parents were up to four times less likely to engage in learning (UNICEF, 2023). Yet interventions such as SMS-based nudges and structured home-reading programmes have shown promise in bridging these gaps (World Bank, 2022).

Parent-Teacher Partnerships in Kenya’s CBC Implementation

Kenya’s 2017 CBC mandates active parental engagement (KICD, 2019). However, early implementation revealed a mismatch between policy expectations and parental readiness (Amunga et al., 2020). Many parents lacked knowledge of CBC or confidence in supporting home-based learning.

Baseline studies found that although most parents had heard of CBC, few understood their role in the curriculum or in their learner's academic progress (Wasonga & Murungi, 2021). Teachers reported frequent parental confusion regarding assignments or methods (Wairimu, 2022), with many expressing dissatisfactions.

Still, there are success stories. Ranji, Chumba, and Kurgat (2025) found that participation in decision-making and home learning support significantly improved CBC implementation in Nakuru County. Their study showed that while basic volunteering had minimal effect, deeper engagement had a greater impact. They recommend targeted strategies such as teacher-parent training, national awareness campaigns, and inclusive engagement platforms.

Inclusivity is key as Kinyua et al. (2025) spotlighted parents of learners with special needs, who often struggle more with CBC’s demands due to a lack of specialised support. Without training or clear communication, these parents face higher barriers, and teachers feel overstretched. Tailored strategies—such as simplified guides or individualised consultations—are essential to ensure CBC reaches all learners, particularly vulnerable learners.

Barriers and Enablers to Effective Parent-Teacher Synergy

While the value of partnerships is clear, multiple barriers persist, as indicated and discussed below.

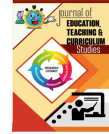
a. Time and Economic Constraints

In urban Kenya, long work hours, single-parent households, and traffic congestion limit parents’ availability. Structural changes that address this major challenge are needed. Community-based meetings or virtual sessions could alleviate such barriers and foster greater parental involvement.

b. Communication and Trust

Trust remains one of the most fragile elements in school–parent relationships. Parents hesitate to approach teachers, unsure of how their concerns will be received. These fears are deeply rooted in Kenya’s educational history, in which teachers were often perceived as distant authority figures rather than approachable partners.

International studies echo this finding, with Goodall and Montgomery (2014) noting that parents’ negative past experiences with schooling can undermine their confidence to engage with teachers. Breaking this cycle requires schools to actively rebuild trust through open, respectful dialogue, the use



of inclusive, non-technical language, and the creation of spaces where parents feel genuinely valued. Even small gestures, such as friendly greetings at drop-off, personalised updates, or proactive teacher outreach, signal openness.

c. Parental Self-Efficacy

A third, equally important challenge is confidence. Many parents want to help but feel unsure about how to support their children under the CBC

Yet, the data also revealed bright spots. Parents felt more engaged when learning touched on familiar areas – such as life skills, cultural values, or practical activities at home. These findings suggest that when schools connect learning to parents’ lived experiences, participation rises naturally. When parents believe they have something meaningful to contribute, their involvement becomes both more consistent and more effective. Goodall and Montgomery (2014) advocate moving from “involvement” to “engagement” – where parents are empowered to initiate support, not merely respond to school instructions as if they themselves are learners.

d. Cultural and Social Norms

In many rural communities, schooling is still seen as the teacher’s domain, with parents deferring to educators as the sole authorities on academic matters. By contrast, parents from more affluent or urban backgrounds often feel more empowered – and sometimes entitled – to question teachers or intervene in learning decisions. These differences mirror wider patterns of social capital and confidence in engaging with institutions (Wanjohi, 2019; Gichobi & Mwaura, 2024).

Public schools, which educate the majority of Kenyan learners, often lack the formal structures or routines that promote genuine parent-school collaboration. Unlike many private institutions that regularly organise parent meetings or use digital portals for communication, public schools tend to rely on ad-hoc channels. Recent research emphasises the need to strengthen Parent-Teacher Associations (PTAs) and ensure that diverse socio-economic voices – especially from low-income and marginalised families – are represented (Okoth & Khamasi, 2023; UNESCO, 2023).

e. Digital Access and Literacy

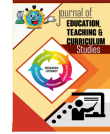
Digital tools are transforming how schools and parents connect. This reflects a broader trend across Kenya and Sub-Saharan Africa, where mobile-based communication has become a bridge for educational inclusion (UNESCO, 2022; UNICEF, 2023). However, deep inequalities remain. During the COVID-19 pandemic, only 22% of Kenyan children accessed any form of digital learning – primarily those from well-resourced urban households (UNICEF, 2023; World Bank, 2024).

These disparities underscore the urgent need to expand affordable internet access and improve parents’ digital literacy, particularly in rural and low-income areas (Kisirkoi & Karimi, 2024).

Method

Research Design

This study adopted a sequential explanatory mixed-methods design (Creswell & Plano Clark, 2007), beginning with a quantitative survey followed by qualitative interviews. The quantitative phase provided a broad picture of parental engagement patterns. At the same time, the follow-up interviews provided more profound insights into how cultural norms, trust, and digital realities shape everyday



school-home relationships. This approach enabled a more grounded understanding of both the quantitative data and the narratives regarding parental involvement in Kenya's evolving Competency-Based Education context.

Participants and Sampling

Conducted in a private primary school in Nairobi County, the study focused on parents of pre-primary to Grade 3 learners – among the earliest cohorts of CBC. The school was selected for its diverse parent population and active engagement programmes.

A total of 38 parents (68% female, 32% male) responded to a questionnaire distributed to 52 families (73% response rate), representing 58 children. This response rate is considered adequate for small-scale educational and social research, particularly where participation is voluntary, and data collection involves busy parents (Creswell & Creswell, 2018). The sample was sufficient to provide meaningful quantitative insights into patterns of parental engagement while remaining manageable for detailed analysis within the study's scope.

To complement the above, eight parents (4 mothers, four fathers) were purposively selected for interviews to capture a range of involvement levels and household contexts. The selection aimed to ensure gender balance and to capture variation in levels of involvement and household contexts – key factors influencing parental engagement (Patton, 2015). This size aligns with qualitative research norms emphasising depth over breadth (Guest, Namey, & Chen, 2020). In qualitative inquiry, a sample of 6–12 participants is typically sufficient to reach thematic saturation, at which point additional interviews yield minimal new insights.

The quantitative tool was an adapted version of the Family-School Relationships Survey by Panorama Education (Gehlbach et al., 2015), covering dimensions like engagement, efficacy, barriers, and support. It was pilot-tested and revised for CBC relevance, including the addition of items on homework confidence and digital communication. Internal reliability was acceptable (e.g., Cronbach's $\alpha = 0.78$ for the Family Support scale). Most items used Likert-type responses, supplemented by open-ended prompts, with 1 indicating the least favourable option and 5 the most favourable option.

Qualitative interviews followed a semi-structured guide, lasted 55-75 minutes, were recorded with consent, and were conducted in English.

Data Analysis

Survey data were analysed descriptively in SPSS (Version 25), using frequencies, means, and cross-tabulations. Interview transcripts were coded thematically (Braun and Clarke, 2006), with both inductive and deductive codes. Key themes included communication barriers, curriculum navigation, and aspirations. Triangulation ensured integration of survey and interview findings.

Validity, Reliability, and Ethics

Reliability was supported by the use of validated tools and inter-coder agreement in qualitative analysis. Content and face validity were ensured through expert review and pilot testing. Ethical clearance was obtained from Laikipia University Ethics Board, informed consent was secured, and anonymity was maintained. Participation was voluntary, with feedback summaries shared with the school and participants after the study.



Results and Discussion

a) Family Engagement with School

Family engagement was assessed through interactions with teachers, parent groups, peer discussions, and fundraising. A majority (73.6%) reported frequently meeting teachers – a positive indicator of formal involvement. As one mother shared, “I make sure to see the class teacher at least once a month,” highlighting parental dedication when opportunities exist.

However, deeper engagement was limited: only 11% actively participated in parent groups, and just 2.7% in school fundraising, echoing Kimani's (2018) findings on low parental initiative beyond teacher meetings. This may stem from structural barriers or the perceived sufficiency of financial input. Informal parent-to-parent discussions were more common (52.6% often), suggesting untapped potential in peer support networks.

This aligns with Goodall and Montgomery (2014), who emphasised that cultivating community among parents enhances engagement. Kenya's Vision 2030 promotes community-driven schooling, and SDG 4 emphasises inclusive and equitable education, goals that are achievable when schools facilitate more collaborative parent structures.

b) School Fit and Parental Satisfaction

Most parents reported that the school suited their child's academic and social needs, citing effective discipline and teacher care. However, 20% raised concerns over curriculum load or teacher strictness, revealing misalignment for some learners. For instance, one parent noted, “My son hates the school... says the teacher is too strict.”

Parental satisfaction influences engagement. Satisfied parents tend to collaborate, while dissatisfied ones may disengage, or plan exits (Yang & Zhang, 2025). Under CBC, parental concerns often stemmed from curriculum delivery rather than school ethos, indicating a gap between CBC ideals and school execution.

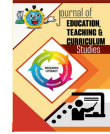
c) Family Support for Learning at Home

Parental support at home was mixed. Most (68%) frequently talked with children about what they had learned – a crucial form of engagement supported by Boonk et al. (2018) and Wilder (2014). Parents used routines like car rides or evening check-ins to reinforce learning through dialogue.

However, only 25% frequently helped children understand content, and 32% rarely did. Interviews revealed that parents felt ill-equipped for CBC pedagogy: “Half the time, I don't know what I am doing,” one said. Many sought out older siblings, YouTube, or teachers, aligning with earlier findings on low parental academic efficacy and know-how.

While parents ensured that homework time was set aside (99% accepted this role), actual instruction was inconsistent because the parent was often absent. This gap is problematic for CBC, which requires home reinforcement of concepts and substantial practical coaching. As KICD (2019) stresses, parental empowerment in CBC is essential and cannot be voided. This is echoed by Epstein (2007) in his model, where he asserts that opportunity alone does not ensure effective participation.

Encouragingly, emotional support for learners was substantial: 53% of learners frequently discussed social challenges with their children. These results reinforce Epstein's model (2007), which posits Types



1 (parenting) and 6 (community collaboration), that structural inclusion does not equate to meaningful participation unless mindsets are addressed. Still, CBC's success depends on strengthening academic support, and, as posited above, this is severely lacking.

d) Parental Self-Efficacy

Self-efficacy revealed a sharp contrast: while 88% were confident making educational decisions (like school choice), only 23% felt similarly about supporting learning at home. Only 3% felt “extremely confident” in academic support.

Low self-efficacy stemmed from unfamiliarity with CBC content and methods. One parent remarked, “I had to relearn the alphabet using phonics.” This generational curriculum gap reduced parents’ confidence, aligning with Hoover-Dempsey’s model (1997) linking efficacy to involvement and further reveals the narrow role construction where they see and think of themselves as facilitators and not co-educators.

Regarding decision-making, many parents expressed high confidence—particularly those with children in private schools. This is perhaps unsurprising: the very act of choosing a school reinforces a sense of agency and control. Yet, confidence does not always translate into competence. Parents may feel empowered to make decisions but still lack access to accurate information about curriculum, learning methods, or child development. As a result, even well-intentioned choices can sometimes misalign with a child’s actual needs.

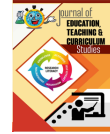
Building academic support efficacy—that is, parents’ belief in their ability to meaningfully assist their children—is therefore essential. In contrast, only 23% of parents felt confident in supporting learning at home, despite 88% feeling confident in making schooling decisions. This disconnect between the two parameters illustrates the Hoover-Dempsey and Sandeler (1997) model’s prediction that belief in one’s ability shapes actual participation. Positive, hands-on experiences, such as successfully helping with a CBC project or guiding a reading task, often transform parents from passive observers into active co-educators. As Goodall and Montgomery (2014) note, engagement flourishes when parents feel both welcomed and capable.

e) Barriers to Engagement

Barriers spanned logistical, emotional, and systemic dimensions. Nairobi’s traffic emerged as the top impediment – 97% marked it a “very large problem.” This highlights a structural challenge that requires policy responses, such as school zoning or flexible meeting formats.

Time constraints also loomed large: 75% cited busy schedules as significant barriers. This mirrors global patterns (Epstein, 2007). Schools must accommodate working parents via evening events or digital engagement.

Notably, 92% reported feeling unsure about how to communicate with teachers, indicating unclear protocols and an intimidating school climate. Fear of “retaliation” against the child if concerns were raised was cited by 91%, underscoring trust deficits in teacher-parent dynamics. Some feared being “seen as troublesome,” reflecting deep-seated respect-fear dynamics rooted in Kenya’s school culture.



Past negative experiences (79%) and children’s reluctance to engage in parental contact with schools (82%) further hindered engagement. Parents recalled being “afraid of teachers” during their own schooling, which has inhibited their current participation.

These findings align with Hoover-Dempsey’s theory and reinforce the need for schools to build parent-friendly cultures. Simple interventions such as regular teacher updates, anonymous feedback channels, and assurances of fairness can build trust.

f) Roles and Responsibilities

We explored how parents view responsibility across learning tasks. For academic understanding, 87% assigned this to schools, while only 2% saw it as primarily theirs. This indicates a heavy reliance on teachers, undermining CBC’s home-school collaboration ethos.

Conversely, 99% accepted the duty of managing homework time – showing that while parents control structure, they largely defer content delivery to educators. For identifying children’s interests, responses were split (50% parents, 25% teachers, 25% children), indicating uncertainty about ownership of talent development.

Parents felt strongly that play (93%) and non-academic growth were their responsibilities. Communication was largely viewed as the school’s role (70%), suggesting a passive communication posture by parents.

This highlights mismatched expectations. If schools assume parents will reinforce lessons and parents expect full delivery from schools, children may miss needed support. Clarifying roles – possibly via home-school compacts – can align responsibilities.

g) Overall Effort Invested by Parents

Self-assessed effort revealed a polarised picture: 39% felt they put “tremendous effort,” while 30% admitted minimal involvement. The rest (about 30%) reported moderate effort.

Highly engaged parents often supported homework, monitored progress, and proactively communicated – correlating with higher confidence levels. In contrast, low-effort parents cited lack of time, confidence, or perceived duty (“I pay fees, that’s enough”).

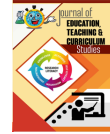
This heterogeneity underscores a key CBC challenge: schools serve children whose home support varies vastly. As one teacher put it, “Some parents are all in; others are ghosts.”

Effort does not always equal effectiveness. Schools should help all parents – even busy ones – identify high-impact, low-time strategies (like daily reading). For very engaged parents, channeling energy into productive contributions (like volunteering) prevents overreach (e.g., doing children’s work).

h) Children’s Comfort Seeking Help from School Adults

Approximately 78% of parents reported that their child was at least somewhat comfortable seeking help from school staff. Yet, only 13% rated their child as “extremely comfortable,” suggesting room for growth.

Children’s help-seeking behaviours reflect school climate and parental cues. Fear of “snitching” or strict teachers, as noted in interviews, sometimes deterred learners. Conversely, when children witnessed positive parent-teacher interactions, their trust increased.



Limitations of the study

The study's findings should be interpreted with several limitations in mind. Although the survey achieved a strong response rate, the small sample of 38 parents limits generalizability. Equally, participation was voluntary, raising the likelihood of self-selection bias among more engaged parents. The purposive selection of eight interviewees offered depth but restricted the diversity of perspectives. Because all data were self-reported, responses may reflect social desirability or recall bias. Conducting the study within a single school further limits transferability to other contexts. Finally, the cross-sectional design captures parental engagement at a single point in time rather than its evolution over the year.

Conclusion

The study affirms that parent-teacher partnerships are essential to learner success within Kenya's CBE, reinforcing global research showing that active parental engagement enhances academic achievement, emotional well-being, and social development (Epstein, 2007; Wilder, 2014). Many parents reported regular communication with teachers and consistent discussions with their children about schoolwork, ensuring structured homework routines that promote discipline and focus. These everyday forms of involvement create a strong foundation for meaningful learning and life-long practices of care.

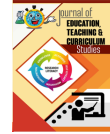
However, deeper participation—such as assisting with complex academic tasks or contributing to school-level decision-making—remained limited. This constrains the realisation of CBC's vision of education as a shared responsibility between schools and families.

Engagement was further constrained by structural and cultural barriers, including demanding work schedules, traffic congestion, and the entrenched societal belief that teachers hold exclusive authority over learning. Inequities in digital access and limited support for parents of children with special needs also hindered inclusive participation.

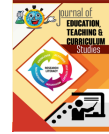
To strengthen parent-teacher synergy, two recommendations are proposed. First, schools should establish structured parental orientation and training programmes on CBC pedagogy to enhance confidence and competence in home-based learning. Second, education policymakers should institutionalise flexible communication channels—such as digital platforms and community forums—to accommodate working parents and foster inclusive dialogue.

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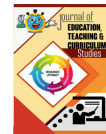
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