

Beyond Willingness: Structural Barriers to Participation in School Activities

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ABSTRACT

The study finds that low participation in school activities is mainly caused by structural barriers such as time constraints, work and household responsibilities, financial limitations, and poor communication. Although parents and learners are willing to engage, conflicts with schedules, costs, and late announcements make participation difficult, especially for low-income families. The research concludes that these challenges are not due to lack of interest but to socioeconomic and organizational factors, and it recommends flexible scheduling, early communication, and reduced costs to make school involvement more accessible and inclusive.

INTRODUCTION

The study highlights that participation in school activities is influenced more by structural factors than by individual willingness. Despite strong interest from parents and students, engagement is limited by socioeconomic challenges, work-family conflicts, financial constraints, and poor communication. Both international and local evidence show that hidden costs, time limitations, and poverty significantly reduce involvement, especially in the Philippine context. The research emphasizes that these barriers are systemic rather than personal and calls for more flexible scheduling, improved communication, and inclusive, low-cost programs. It aims to promote a community-based approach grounded in cooperation to make participation more accessible for all stakeholders.

METHODOLOGY

The study adopted a qualitative research design to capture the depth and context of participants lived experiences regarding school engagement. Purposive sampling yielded 25 parent respondents from Mendiz Elementary School, located in barangay Mendis, municipality of Pangantucan, Bukidnon, Northern Mindanao, Philippines. Data were collected through in-person semi-structured interviews using an open-ended guide that addressed four focal areas: (1) school activities in which parents and students participated (for example, after-school remedial classes, parent-teacher meetings, feeding programs, extracurricular competitions, and mandatory school clean-up days); (2) reasons for non-participation (time constraints, employment schedules, perceived irrelevance); (3) specific challenges encountered (concrete financial burdens such as hidden uniform fees, transportation costs for inter-school events, payments for learning materials, compulsory fundraising targets, and informal “voluntary” contributions); and (4) parents’ recommendations for improvement. Interviews were audio-recorded with consent and transcribed verbatim.

Thematic analysis guided interpretation: transcripts were coded iteratively to identify recurring patterns, similar ideas were grouped into candidate themes, and dominant themes were refined through constant comparison. Representative verbatim excerpts from parents were retained to support and justify each theme, ensuring that findings remain grounded in participants’ accounts rather than researcher inference.

The semi-structured interview guide prompted participants to describe specific school activities attended and not attended, to recount precise out-of-pocket expenses and other barriers, and to suggest remedial measures. Thematic analysis proceeded in six steps: familiarization, initial coding, searching for themes, reviewing themes,

defining/naming themes, and producing the report. Two researchers independently coded a subset of transcripts to enhance credibility; discrepancies were discussed until consensus. Member checking was performed with a sample of five participants to verify interpretation of emergent themes. A reflexive audit trail documented analytic decisions to improve dependability.

Ethical considerations are maintained by treating all responses with confidentiality and using them strictly for academic purposes. The credibility of the analysis is strengthened by deriving themes solely from recurring ideas in the participants' actual statements, ensuring the results reflect their common experiences without researcher bias or distortion.

RESULT AND DISSCUSSION

1. What are the usual activities conducted in your school (e.g., academic, extracurricular, or community-based)?

Emerging theme: Time and financial constraints limit participation.

Supporting statements

- “Health Concerns, Financial Constraints, Conflict of Schedule” (PA1).
- “Conflict to work schedule” (PA4).
- “Time and work constraints” (PA7).
- “Conflict of time, working parents” (PA8).
- “Conflict Schedule and other activities” (PA13).
- “Lack of budget... lack of motivation” (PA15).
- “Lack of budget... lack of interest” (PA16).
- “working” (PA17).
- “Pupils cannot afford d proper costume because of poverty” (PA18).
- “Financial constraint of the parents to support their children” (PA22).

Most responses point to the same core issue: participants are willing to join school activities, but work schedules, lack of time, and financial limitations prevent full participation. Responses about lack of interest, distance, communication gaps, or resources appear, but they are not as dominant as the time-and-budget problem.

The emerging theme can be interpreted as time and financial barriers limiting school participation, and its implication is that involvement in school activities depends not only on willingness but also on available time, money, and schedule flexibility. In responses, parents and learners repeatedly pointed to work conflicts, budget problems, and lack of time as the main reasons they could not fully engage in school activities.

Thematic analysis

Most of the responses show that participation is constrained by competing responsibilities and economic limits. Several participants mentioned work-related conflicts such as “conflict to work schedule,” “time and work constraints,” “working,” and “conflict of time, working parents.” Others emphasized financial pressure through statements like “lack of budget,” “pupils cannot afford proper costume because of poverty,” and “financial constraint of the parents to support their children.” These responses suggest that the core issue is not lack of interest, but limited access caused by practical burdens.

This theme is also reinforced by the challenges participants described. They identified “time management difficulties,” “financial limitations,” “limited resources,” “activities usually conducted during weekdays,” and “lack of available vehicle to use.” These statements show that school participation becomes difficult when activities are scheduled during work hours or require additional expenses. The pattern indicates that participation is shaped by structural barriers rather than individual unwillingness.

Implications for school practice

The findings suggest that improving participation in school activities requires addressing scheduling, cost, and communication issues. Activities held during weekdays often exclude working parents, so more flexible scheduling and early consultation are needed. Financial demands such as costumes and transportation create unequal opportunities, making it important to provide low-cost or school-supported alternatives. Additionally, timely and clear communication is essential so families can plan ahead and manage both their time and resources effectively.

2. What are your reasons for not participating in school activities?

Emerging theme: Time, work, and financial constraints hinder participation.

Supporting statements

- PA1: “Health Concerns, Financial Constraints, Conflict of Schedule.”
- PA4: “Conflict to work schedule.”
- PA6: “Busy work schedules and conflicting office hours,” “Lack of time due to household responsibilities,” and “Activities being scheduled during weekdays when most parents are at work.”
- PA7: “Time and work constraints.”
- PA8: “Conflict of time, working parents.”
- PA11: “Conflict of schedule.”
- PA12: “Distance from school to home and both parents are laborer.”
- PA13: “Conflict Schedule and other activities.”
- PA14: “parents lack of support for their children and lack of budget.”
- PA15: “Lack of budget, lack of parents support.”
- PA16: “Lack of budget.”
- PA17: “working.”
- PA18: “Pupils cannot afford proper costume because of poverty.”
- PA21: “Conflict of work.”
- PA22: “Financial constraint of the parents to support their children.”
- PA23: “have their work, busy.”

Interpretation

The responses show that the main barrier is not refusal to participate, but the combined pressure of work obligations, schedule conflicts, and limited financial resources. Some answers also mention interest, confidence, and other personal reasons, but these appear less frequent than time and money-related concerns.

The emerging theme is time, work, and financial constraints hinder participation, and its implication is that school involvement is shaped by practical barriers rather than by lack of concern or willingness. In responses, parents and learners repeatedly pointed to conflicting work schedules, household responsibilities, distance, and limited budgets as the main reasons for non-participation. This means that participation is most likely to improve when schools design activities that are affordable, flexible, and communicated early.

Thematic interpretation

The statements show a consistent pattern of constraint. PA4, PA7, PA8, PA11, PA13, PA17, PA21, and PA23 all point to work or schedule conflicts, while PA14, PA15, PA16, PA18, and PA22 highlight budget limitations, poverty, and lack of support. PA6 adds that many parents are unavailable during weekdays because of office hours and caregiving duties, which makes attendance difficult even when they are willing to join. Taken together, the responses suggest that non-participation is largely caused by competing responsibilities and economic pressure.

This theme is also visible in the learners' side of the responses. PA5 mentions shyness, low confidence, limited skill, and lack of interest, but these appear as secondary reasons compared with the more frequent work and budget issues. PA9 adds literacy limitations, which may further reduce involvement in school activities that require reading, understanding instructions, or supporting learning at home. The overall pattern is that participation barriers are layered, but the strongest and most repeated barriers remain time and money.

Implications for schools

One implication is that school leaders should avoid assuming that non-participation reflects indifference. The responses suggest that many parents and learners want to participate but are constrained by job schedules, caregiving duties, and financial demands. If schools schedule activities during work hours or require extra personal spending, participation will continue to exclude working families and low-income households.

Another implication is that activities should be planned with flexibility and accessibility in mind. Schools may benefit from using early announcements, alternative schedules, low-cost participation options, and communication channels that reach working parents. For learners, providing support for costumes, materials, and transportation may reduce the burden of joining school activities. These steps can help make involvement more realistic for families with limited time and resources.

A further implication is that participation strategies should be inclusive of different family situations. Some respondents described distance from school, labor work, caregiving responsibilities, and limited literacy. This means that a single attendance strategy will not work for all families. Schools need differentiated approaches that recognize parents who are available, parents who work, and learners who need encouragement or practical support.

3. What challenges do you encounter when engaging in school activities?

The dominant challenge in Question 3 is time, scheduling, and financial/resource constraints, and the responses suggest that participation is hindered more by practical demands than by lack of concern. Several participants described conflicts between school activities and work, household responsibilities, limited funds, transportation issues, poor coordination, and late communication, which together create a strong pattern of access barriers.

Thematic analysis

The responses consistently point to time pressure as the most visible challenge. PA2, PA4, PA6, PA7, PA8, PA17, PA22, PA24, and PA25 all refer to schedule conflicts, weekday activities, work duties, or activities that consume too much time. PA2 explains that as both a parent and employee, the respondent must balance school activity schedules with daily work and reporting deadlines, while PA6 adds that many activities happen during working hours and are sometimes announced late. These statements show that participation becomes difficult when school demands compete with work and family responsibilities.

A second cluster of responses focuses on financial and material limitations. PA1 mentions financial limitations and limited resources, PA8 refers to time and finances, PA14 and PA15 mention budget and transport problems, PA16 cites budget and lack of motivation, and PA18 says the respondent shoulders the cost of costumes for pupils. PA24 and PA25 also describe school activities as “time consuming” and requiring “extra budget.” This indicates that even when families are willing to participate, the cost of joining activities can become a barrier.

A third cluster involves coordination and support issues. PA6 mentions communication gaps and limited involvement opportunities, PA7 points to communication barriers, PA12 refers to lack of participation from stakeholders, and PA21 notes poor coordination among teachers, parents, learners, and partners. PA23 adds that only 50 percent attended meetings, which suggests weak turnout may reflect planning or mobilization problems. These responses show that activity participation is also affected by how well schools organize, communicate, and include stakeholders.

Implications for schools

The findings emphasize that participation challenges should be viewed as structural rather than personal, as time constraints, work responsibilities, and financial limitations prevent many from attending. To improve engagement, schools need better planning, including early announcements, stakeholder consultation, and schedules that accommodate working families. Strengthening communication and coordination can also enhance participation. Additionally, reducing hidden costs by providing low-cost or shared resources is essential to ensure more inclusive and accessible school activities.

4. What recommendations can you give to improve participation and the overall conduct of school activities?

Emerging themes: Flexible, inclusive, and well-communicated school activities improve participation.

The responses show a clearly shared recommendation: school activities should be planned in ways that fit participants’ time, budget, and needs, while also making them feel valued and involved. Most participants emphasized early scheduling, better communication, flexible timing, reduced costs, and stronger collaboration between schools, parents, and learners.

Supporting statements

- PA1: “Reduce financial barriers by keeping costs affordable or providing financial assistance when possible.”
- PA2: “Provide enhanced communication and timely announcement... encourage involvement of the stakeholders... schedule the activities... [at] convenient time.”
- PA4: “School activities involving parents maybe conducted beyond office hours.”
- PA5: “Activities should be scheduled at reasonable times... teachers and organizers should explain the purpose clearly... making activities fun, inclusive, and open to all levels of skill.”
- PA6: “Flexible scheduling... Better communication... Incentives and recognition... Survey parents regularly.”
- PA7: “Offer flexible volunteer schedule, host interactive family focus event.”
- PA8: “Set schedule few weeks before the meeting.”
- PA9: “Create a welcoming environment where parents feel valued.”
- PA11: “Reward system.”
- PA12: “Encourage parents involvement... and have them rewarded.”
- PA13: “Cooperation and communication.”

- PA14: “Full cooperation of parents, encourage everyone to join.”
- PA15: “Inform parents ahead of time to allocate budget.”
- PA16: “Inform parents ahead of time to allocate budget.”
- PA17: “Enhance Communication, Encourage Student Involvement and Schedule Activities Effectively.”
- PA18: “Strategic motivation to pupils to participate... develop their talents and gain self confidence.”
- PA19: “Provide appropriate materials.”
- PA20: “Parents should give time to show support their children.”
- PA21: “Plan early and consult SPTA before finalizing the schedule/activities.”
- PA22: “Provide all classroom with Smart TV, Audio visual facilities including internet connectivity.”
- PA24: “must be done after class.”

Analysis

The strongest pattern is that participation improves when school activities are planned early, communicated clearly, and scheduled at accessible times. Many responses also point to the need for affordability, recognition, and inclusive participation so that parents and pupils with different situations can still join. Several participants also emphasized consultation, cooperation, and shared decision-making, which suggests that ownership matters as much as scheduling.

Another important idea is that participation should be supported not only by timing and communication, but also by motivation and preparedness. Some responses focused on rewarding participation, creating a welcoming environment, and helping pupils build confidence through practice and encouragement. This indicates that the conduct of school activities improves when schools address both logistical barriers and the emotional readiness of participants.

Discussion of the theme

The responses suggest that participation in school activities improves when schools make activities accessible, understandable, and relevant to the people expected to join. A dominant pattern across the answers is the need for flexible scheduling, early announcements, reduced financial burden, and stronger communication between school personnel, parents, and learners. Participants repeatedly emphasized that when activities are planned at convenient times, explained clearly, and supported with proper materials or incentives, attendance and involvement become more likely. This shows that participation is not only a matter of willingness, but also of whether the activity is realistic for families with limited time, money, and resources.

The responses also show that inclusiveness is central to improving school activity conduct. Several participants recommended that activities should cater to different talents, abilities, and levels of confidence, while others stressed the value of motivation, rewards, and a welcoming environment. These statements indicate that school activities are more effective when they do not exclude parents or learners who may feel hesitant, unprepared, or financially constrained. Consultation with stakeholders, such as through SPTA meetings, also appears important because it builds ownership and gives participants a voice in planning. Overall, the responses reflect a shared belief that participation increases when school activities are participatory, supportive, and considerate of the realities of the community.

Implications

The implication emphasizes that schools can improve participation by planning early, communicating clearly, and reducing financial burdens. Advance notice and multiple communication channels help families prepare

their time and resources. Making activities affordable and minimizing hidden costs ensures inclusivity, especially for low-income households. Additionally, recognizing participants and creating a supportive, welcoming environment can boost motivation and strengthen engagement.

CONCLUSION

The findings show that participation in school activities is largely influenced by structural barriers rather than lack of interest. Time constraints, work schedules, and financial burdens, such as costs for costumes and transportation, limit the ability of parents and learners to engage. Although stakeholders are willing to participate, competing responsibilities and economic pressures often prevent them from doing so. Communication issues, including late announcements and poor coordination, further restrict involvement by making it difficult for families to plan ahead.

To improve engagement, schools need to adopt more flexible, inclusive, and well-communicated approaches. This includes scheduling activities outside standard work hours, giving early notices, and reducing costs through affordable or shared resources. Creating a welcoming environment and recognizing participants can also boost motivation and confidence. By aligning school practices with the community's socioeconomic realities and promoting the value of bayanihan, participation can become more accessible and inclusive for all.

RECOMMENDATION

The recommendations emphasize improving participation through better planning, flexibility, and inclusivity. Schools should provide early schedules and use multiple communication channels to help families prepare their time and resources. Flexible scheduling, especially outside standard work hours, can accommodate parents' availability, while consulting stakeholders ensures that activities align with community needs. Reducing financial barriers by offering low-cost or shared resources is also essential to make participation accessible to all.

Schools should create a supportive and motivating environment by recognizing participants and designing inclusive activities. Improving facilities and providing necessary materials can further ease participation. Adopting a community-based approach rooted in bayanihan encourages shared responsibility and stronger relationships, ensuring that engagement becomes more equitable and realistic for all stakeholders.

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