

The role of community-based schools in enhancing access to quality education in rural Nigeria and South Africa

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Abstract

This study investigates the role of community-based schools in enhancing access to quality education in rural Nigeria and South Africa. A descriptive survey research design was adopted for the study. The population comprised individuals actively involved with community-based schools in selected rural communities across both countries. A total sample of 300 respondents (150 from Nigeria and 150 from South Africa) was selected using a multi-stage sampling technique involving purposive, stratified, and simple random sampling methods. Data were collected using a structured instrument titled Community-Based Schools Educational Access and Quality Questionnaire (CBSEAQ). The instrument's validity was established through expert review for content and face validity, while its reliability was confirmed through a pilot test, yielding a Cronbach's alpha coefficient of 0.82. Trained research assistants administered the questionnaire and ensured informed consent and respondent anonymity. The researchers analysed the data using SPSS, employing descriptive statistics and inferential tests such as t-tests and chi-square tests to compare responses between countries. The findings revealed that community-based schools improve access to quality education, reduce educational disparities, and enhance school effectiveness through active community participation. However, inadequate infrastructure and weak policy implementation continue to limit access to education, while Nigeria shows greater access to education through community-based schools than South Africa because of stronger community involvement. The study recommended strengthening the implementation of community-based education policies through adequate funding, effective monitoring, and improved rural infrastructure. It also emphasises promoting community participation in school governance, continuous teacher development, regular evaluation, and enhanced collaboration between Nigeria and South Africa to share best practices and improve educational access and quality.

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Introduction

Education is widely recognised as a fundamental human right and a powerful instrument for socio-economic development, social mobility, and individual empowerment. It lays the foundation for sustainable economic growth, democratic participation, and social inclusion.



Globally, education remains central to achieving the Sustainable Development Goals, particularly SDG 4, which seeks to ensure inclusive and equitable quality education and promote lifelong learning opportunities for all (UNESCO, 2020). Access to education refers to learners' opportunity to enrol in, attend, and remain in school without significant physical, financial, or social barriers (UNESCO, 2020).

In contrast, quality education refers to providing effective teaching and learning experiences through qualified teachers, relevant curricula, adequate learning resources, and supportive learning environments that promote meaningful learning outcomes (UNESCO, 2020). Although these concepts are closely related, access concerns participation in education, whereas quality concerns the effectiveness of the educational experience. However, access to education remains a major challenge in many rural areas worldwide, especially in sub-Saharan Africa. In these regions, millions of children face barriers such as poverty, inadequate infrastructure, too few qualified teachers, and long distances to schools. These challenges disproportionately affect rural communities, often leaving them with under-resourced schools and low learning outcomes. Nigeria and South Africa, while among the most developed countries in sub-Saharan Africa, continue to grapple with these issues.

In rural Nigeria, insecurity, poverty, and weak infrastructure hinder educational access, while rural South Africa faces systemic inequities rooted in its historical and socio-economic context (Department of Basic Education [DBE], 2023; UNICEF Nigeria, 2023). These persistent disparities call for context-sensitive and community-driven solutions that can bridge the rural-urban education gap. One such approach is establishing community-based schools, which involve varying levels of community participation in their establishment, management, or support to complement formal education provision. Examining the contribution of these schools to educational access and quality in different national contexts, such as Nigeria and South Africa, can provide valuable evidence to inform policies and strategies aimed at reducing rural educational disparities.

Although Nigeria and South Africa differ in their historical and political paths, both continue to struggle with deep educational gaps between urban and rural areas. In Nigeria, more than 10.2 million children remain out of school, most of them living in remote and rural regions, particularly in the north (UNICEF Nigeria, 2023). For many families in these communities, getting an education is a daily battle. Poor infrastructure, a shortage of qualified teachers, overcrowded classrooms, insecurity, and the long distances children must travel to reach school are major challenges. Many rural schools lack even the most basic amenities like clean water, electricity, libraries, or science labs, making effective teaching and learning extremely difficult (Adejare, 2024).

South Africa faces similar struggles, especially in rural provinces such as Limpopo, Eastern Cape, and KwaZulu-Natal. While schools in urban areas tend to have better facilities and more experienced teachers, rural schools often operate with limited resources and fail to meet minimum standards for quality education. The 2022 National Senior Certificate exam results clearly showed this divide: rural learners continued to fall behind in key subjects like literacy, numeracy, and science (DBE, 2023). The lingering effects of apartheid, combined with ongoing socio-economic marginalisation and geographic isolation, have made it harder for many rural students to succeed (Noutchie, 2025). In both countries, poverty further complicates the situation, making it difficult for families to support their children's education, and public investment in rural schools remains insufficient. These systemic challenges continue to widen the gap between rural and urban learners, undermining efforts to provide inclusive and equitable education for all. To move forward, Nigeria and South Africa need innovative, locally driven solutions. These schools offer a more adaptive, context-sensitive path toward closing the rural-urban education divide.

The national evidence base shows how these rural disadvantages are configured differently in the two countries. In northern Nigeria, a large share of children attend Qur'anic

and Islamiyya schools outside the secular state system, so expanding access has required engagement with religious and community institutions rather than building government schools alone (Antoninis, 2014). Enrolment figures can also overstate participation: classroom observation in northern Nigerian primary schools shows that formally enrolled children are frequently absent or move in and out of school during the year, so being 'counted in' does not guarantee being present for learning (Humphreys et al., 2015). In South Africa, by contrast, almost all children are enrolled, yet learning outcomes follow a sharply bimodal pattern in which the majority of learners, concentrated in poorer and largely rural schools, perform far below those in the historically advantaged minority of schools (Spaull, 2013). Rural schools in South Africa also struggle to attract and retain qualified teachers because of geographic isolation, poor living conditions and limited professional support (du Plessis & Mestry, 2019). These contrasting profiles suggest that 'access' cannot be reduced to enrolment and that any assessment of community-based schools must consider attendance, teacher supply and learning as well as physical availability.

Community-based schools are educational institutions established, managed, or supported through substantial participation by local communities, including community associations, religious organisations, and non-governmental organisations, to expand educational opportunities in underserved areas (Kristina et al., 2006). Community-based schools have become vital grassroots efforts to close the education gap in underserved rural communities. Unlike traditional public schools run by central governments, these schools are often founded and managed by local communities, religious groups, or non-governmental organisations. Their main purpose is to offer educational opportunities in areas where formal schools are either lacking, too far away, or not functioning effectively. Because they are deeply rooted in the social and cultural life of the communities they serve, community-based schools are well-positioned to deliver inclusive education that aligns with local values and traditions (Kristina et al., 2006). What sets these schools apart is their flexibility. Unlike conventional schools bound by rigid curricula and centralised policies, community-based schools can tailor teaching methods, schedules, and learning content to meet students' needs. This flexibility is especially important in rural settings, where children often face unique challenges such as poverty, seasonal work, or cultural obligations that affect school attendance and learning (Chikoko, 2008). By adapting to these realities, community-based schools offer a more responsive and accessible model of education for some of the most marginalised learners.

Conceptually, this study draws on the literature on community participation and school-based management, which holds that schools become more responsive and accountable when the people they serve have a meaningful role in their governance. Bray (2003) distinguishes between forms of community initiative, from the mobilisation of local resources to the full establishment and management of schools, and stresses that the relationship between communities and governments determines whether such initiatives reduce or reproduce inequality, since richer communities are better able to finance and manage their own schools. Experimental evidence lends support to the governance argument but also qualifies it. In Kenya, training school committees to monitor locally hired teachers strengthened the effectiveness of efforts to reduce class sizes and improved pupil outcomes, indicating that local oversight can raise teacher effort (Duflo et al., 2015). In Indonesia, interventions that linked school committees with village authorities improved learning more than grants or training alone, suggesting that community participation is most effective when it is connected to existing local institutions (Pradhan et al., 2014). By contrast, informing communities about their rights and responsibilities in village education committees in India did not by itself increase participation or improve learning, which warns against assuming that formal participatory structures automatically translate into better schooling (Banerjee et al., 2010).

These findings matter because enrolment gains in many developing countries have not been matched by learning gains, and the most effective interventions tend to combine improved access with accountability and teaching matched to learners' actual levels (Kremer et al., 2013).

Community-based schools are therefore best understood not simply as an alternative way to provide school places, but as an institutional arrangement whose value depends on how community participation, teacher support, and state oversight are combined. This framework informs the comparison of Nigeria and South Africa in the present study, in which access, quality, community involvement and policy support are examined together rather than in isolation.

The success and sustainability of community-based schools often depend on strong involvement from local communities and traditional governance structures. Parents, community leaders, and volunteers frequently play active roles in managing the schools, recruiting teachers, and gathering resources. This level of participation builds a strong sense of ownership and responsibility, which can lead to higher student enrolment and improved learning outcomes. Still, these schools face significant hurdles, including inadequate funding, limited access to teacher training, and a lack of consistent policy support, all of which can hinder their ability to provide quality education consistently (Chacha & Tangi, 2023).

Despite these challenges, community-based schools are increasingly recognised as valuable partners in broadening access to education and reducing inequality, especially in rural areas of Nigeria and South Africa. Although the value of community-based schools in expanding educational access for underserved rural populations is widely recognised, empirical research on how these schools operate across different African contexts remains limited. While local case studies and anecdotal evidence point to their positive impact on access, enrolment, and learner engagement, broader and more comparative studies, particularly between countries such as Nigeria and South Africa, remain scarce. This gap in evidence makes it difficult for policymakers and education stakeholders to fully understand the effectiveness, scalability, and long-term sustainability of these community-driven models.

While Nigeria and South Africa differ in their socio-political and economic landscapes, they both face a shared challenge: persistent educational inequality in rural areas. Studying how community-based schools function within each country offers a valuable chance to uncover what works best in each context, the obstacles these schools face, and where policy support may be lacking. It also provides an opportunity to assess their effectiveness in delivering quality education, promoting equity, and fostering meaningful community involvement. Additionally, examining the extent of government backing, the role of various stakeholders, and how resources are mobilised can offer practical insights into how these schools might be more effectively integrated into national education systems.

This research aims to explore the state of educational access in rural communities, assess how well community-based schools are performing and how inclusive they are, and identify the key operational and structural challenges they face. It also examines the extent of community involvement and policy support these schools receive in both Nigeria and South Africa. By taking a comparative approach, the study hopes to generate valuable insights that can enhance the effectiveness of community-based education and contribute to wider efforts to promote inclusive, high-quality education across sub-Saharan Africa.

This study contributes to the literature in three ways. First, it provides comparative evidence from two of the largest education systems in sub-Saharan Africa, which differ markedly in their histories, governance arrangements and levels of state capacity, but which share persistent rural disadvantage. Second, it examines access, quality, community participation and policy support within a single framework, rather than treating community involvement as an isolated variable. Third, by drawing on the perspectives of students, parents, teachers and school administrators, it captures how the stakeholders most directly involved in community-based schools understand their contribution and limitations. The study responds to calls for evidence that moves beyond whether community participation is desirable to the

conditions under which it improves educational opportunities (Bray, 2003; Kremer et al., 2013).

Statement of the problem

Access to education remains a significant challenge in many rural communities across sub-Saharan Africa, despite ongoing global efforts to promote inclusive and equitable learning for all. In countries such as Nigeria and South Africa, sharp disparities persist between urban and rural areas in school infrastructure, teacher availability, student outcomes, and overall access to education. Rural schools often face overcrowded classrooms, inadequate facilities, underqualified staff, and limited government funding. These challenges often lead to high dropout rates, poor academic performance, and reduced future opportunities for children living in these communities. In response, community-based schools have emerged as alternative models to narrow the educational gap by drawing on local resources, cultural relevance, and grassroots participation. These schools are especially valued for offering flexible, context-sensitive learning opportunities in marginalised settings. However, while they are increasingly recognised for expanding access to education, empirical evidence on their effectiveness remains limited, particularly regarding educational quality, long-term sustainability, and integration into national policy frameworks.

Furthermore, little comparative research exists on how these schools function in different national contexts, such as Nigeria and South Africa, where educational systems, governance structures, and socio-economic realities vary considerably. This lack of comparative insight highlights a critical gap in both educational research and policymaking. Without a deeper understanding of how community-based schools operate, the challenges they encounter, and the outcomes they achieve across diverse rural settings, strategies to support or scale these models may fall short. This study, therefore, aims to explore the role of community-based schools in improving access to quality education in rural Nigeria and South Africa. It will examine their impact, the obstacles they face, and the extent of community and policy involvement in their operation. The goal is to generate evidence to inform more inclusive, sustainable, and contextually grounded educational strategies, ultimately contributing to efforts to reduce rural educational inequality and advance equitable learning opportunities for all.

Accordingly, this study pursued six objectives: to assess the current state of access to education in rural areas of Nigeria and South Africa; to investigate the role community-based schools play in reducing educational disparities in rural communities; to evaluate the quality of education provided by community-based schools in comparison with government-run rural schools; to identify the challenges community-based schools face in delivering quality education; to examine the level of community participation and local stakeholder involvement in the management of these schools; and to determine the policy frameworks supporting community-based education initiatives in both countries. These objectives were translated into six corresponding research questions, which structure the presentation of the descriptive results. In addition, two null hypotheses were tested: that there is no significant difference between Nigeria and South Africa in the level of access to education provided by community-based schools in rural areas (H1), and that there is no significant difference in the quality of education delivered by community-based schools in rural Nigeria and South Africa (H2).

Method

This study employed a descriptive survey research design to investigate the role of community-based schools in improving access to quality education in rural areas of Nigeria and South Africa. This design allowed for the systematic collection of quantitative data through structured questionnaires administered to key stakeholders, including students, teachers, parents, and school administrators. The study population consisted of individuals actively involved with community-based schools in selected rural communities across both countries.

These respondents were chosen for their direct engagement with, and influence on, educational access and delivery. The study sampled 300 respondents: 150 from Nigeria and 150 from South Africa. In each country, the sample comprised 60 students, 40 parents, 30 teachers, and 20 school administrators. A multi-stage sampling technique ensured a diverse and representative sample. First, three researchers purposively selected communities with active community-based schools. Within these communities, the researchers used stratified sampling to categorise participants by stakeholder group.

Then, simple random sampling was applied within each stratum to select individual respondents. The primary data collection tool was the Community-Based Schools Educational Access and Quality Questionnaire (CBSEAQ). The questionnaire featured both closed-ended and Likert-scale items designed to measure five key dimensions: access to education, quality of instruction, community involvement, operational challenges, and policy support. To ensure instrument validity, subject-matter experts reviewed and refined its content and face validity. A pilot study assessed reliability, yielding a Cronbach's alpha of 0.82, indicating high internal consistency. Trained research assistants administered the questionnaires, guided respondents through the process, obtained informed consent, and maintained a neutral stance to support independent and honest responses. Data collection was completed over two weeks in each country. The team analysed the data using SPSS. Descriptive statistics, such as mean and standard deviation, were used to address the research questions, while inferential statistics, specifically independent-samples t-tests, were used to assess differences between the two countries. All hypotheses were tested at the 0.05 level of significance. Ethical considerations were rigorously observed. Participation was voluntary, and all respondents were assured of confidentiality and anonymity. Informed consent was obtained from every participant prior to data collection.

Nigeria and South Africa were selected as comparison cases because they represent two contrasting configurations of rural educational disadvantage within sub-Saharan Africa. Nigeria combines a large out-of-school population with a diverse landscape of community, religious and private providers (Antoninis, 2014; Humphreys et al., 2015), whereas South Africa has achieved near-universal enrolment but continues to show deep inequalities in learning between historically advantaged and disadvantaged schools (Spaull, 2013). Comparing the two countries therefore makes it possible to examine whether community-based schooling contributes mainly to expanding access, to improving quality, or to both, under different levels of state capacity. A survey design was considered appropriate because it allowed the perceptions of several stakeholder groups to be captured with the same instrument in both countries, making the responses directly comparable across national contexts.

The inclusion of four stakeholder groups was intended to reflect the multi-actor character of community-based schooling, in which learners, parents, teachers and school leaders each hold different forms of knowledge about how schools function. This approach is consistent with the view that community participation and school governance can only be understood by considering the perspectives of those who take part in them, including parents serving on school governing structures (Chikoko, 2008; Mncube, 2009) and principals who must coordinate relations between schools and communities (Mestry, 2017). Collecting data from all four groups also reduced the risk that the findings would reflect the views of a single, potentially more privileged group of respondents.

Results and Discussion

Descriptive statistics

Research Question 1: What is the current state of access to education in rural areas of Nigeria and South Africa?

Table 1 indicates that access to education in rural areas of both Nigeria and South Africa remains limited. Mean scores for access to primary and secondary education are relatively low

in both countries (Nigeria: 2.40 and 2.47; South Africa: 2.53 and 2.60), suggesting that schools are not easily accessible. High mean scores for items related to distance (Nigeria: 3.20; South Africa: 3.17) and lack of transportation (Nigeria: 3.10; South Africa: 3.13) further highlight significant barriers to school attendance. Additionally, both countries scored low on the adequacy of school facilities (Nigeria: 2.33; South Africa: 2.43), indicating infrastructural challenges. The findings reveal that rural learners in both nations face considerable obstacles in accessing quality education.

Table 1.

Descriptive analysis of the current state of access to education in rural areas of Nigeria and South Africa

Item	Statement	Nigeria		South Africa	
		Mean	S.D	Mean	S.D
1	Children in this rural area have easy access to primary education.	2.40	0.98	2.53	0.92
2	Secondary schools are available and accessible in this community.	2.47	0.99	2.60	0.93
3	Distance to school affects student enrolment in this area.	3.20	0.86	3.17	0.85
4	Lack of transportation is a major barrier to school attendance.	3.10	0.90	3.13	0.84
5	There are adequate school facilities to accommodate all rural children.	2.33	0.98	2.43	0.96

Research Question 2: How do community-based schools contribute to reducing educational disparities in rural communities?

The results in Table 2 suggest that community-based schools play a positive role in reducing educational disparities in rural communities of both Nigeria and South Africa. Respondents in both countries agree that such schools have increased enrolment (Nigeria: 3.10; South Africa: 3.20) and are effective in reaching previously out-of-school children (Nigeria: 3.20; South Africa: 3.30). They also acknowledge the flexibility of community-based schools in addressing the needs of marginalised learners (Nigeria: 3.17; South Africa: 3.27). Furthermore, these schools are seen as helping to reduce dropout rates and promote educational equity, although the mean scores for these items are slightly lower but still above average. The findings indicate that community-based schools are valuable mechanisms for improving access and inclusion in rural education systems.

Table 2.

Descriptive analysis of how community-based schools contribute to reducing educational disparities in rural communities

Item	Statement	Nigeria		South Africa	
		Mean	S.D	Mean	S.D
1	Community-based schools have increased enrolment in rural areas.	3.10	0.86	3.20	0.79
2	These schools help reduce dropout rates among rural children.	2.97	0.91	3.03	0.89
3	Community-based schools reach children who were previously out of school.	3.20	0.86	3.30	0.78
4	These schools are flexible in addressing the needs of marginalised learners.	3.17	0.87	3.27	0.79
5	Community-based schools contribute significantly to educational equity.	3.00	0.88	3.10	0.87

Research Question 3: What is the quality of education offered by community-based schools compared with government-run rural schools?

Table 3 indicates that respondents generally view the quality of education offered by community-based schools in rural areas of Nigeria and South Africa positively and as somewhat comparable to that of government-run schools. Respondents agree that teachers in these schools are well-trained (Nigeria: 3.07; South Africa: 3.20) and that the learning environment is conducive (Nigeria: 3.07; South Africa: 3.20). Although the adequacy of learning materials received slightly lower mean scores (Nigeria: 2.97; South Africa: 3.07), academic performance in community-based schools is perceived to be on par with government schools (Nigeria: 3.03; South Africa: 3.17). Additionally, the higher mean scores for the use of innovative or locally relevant teaching methods (Nigeria: 3.17; South Africa: 3.30) suggest that community-based schools may offer pedagogical advantages. The findings reflect a favourable perception of the quality of education provided by community-based schools in both countries.

Table 3.

Descriptive analysis of the quality of education offered by community-based schools compared with government-run rural schools

Item	Statement	Nigeria		South Africa	
		Mean	S.D	Mean	S.D
1	Teachers in community-based schools are well-trained and qualified.	3.07	0.86	3.20	0.79
2	Learning materials and resources are adequate in community-based schools.	2.97	0.91	3.07	0.88
3	Student academic performance in community-based schools is comparable to government schools.	3.03	0.91	3.17	0.86
4	Community-based schools use innovative or locally relevant teaching methods.	3.17	0.86	3.30	0.78
5	The school environment in community-based schools is conducive to learning.	3.07	0.86	3.20	0.79

Research Question 4: What challenges do community-based schools face in delivering quality education in rural areas?

The results in Table 4 highlight several significant challenges faced by community-based schools in delivering quality education in rural areas of Nigeria and South Africa. Both countries report high mean scores across all items, indicating broad agreement that these schools struggle with lack of funding (Nigeria: 3.13; South Africa: 3.20), inadequate infrastructure (Nigeria: 3.17; South Africa: 3.23), and a shortage of qualified teachers (Nigeria: 3.13; South Africa: 3.20). Staff retention is also a concern (Nigeria: 3.03; South Africa: 3.13), alongside insufficient policy and government support (Nigeria: 3.07; South Africa: 3.17). These findings reveal that despite their positive role, community-based schools face systemic and structural barriers that hinder their effectiveness in rural education delivery.

Table 4.

Descriptive analysis of the challenges community-based schools face in delivering quality education in rural areas

Item	Statement	Nigeria		South Africa	
		Mean	S.D	Mean	S.D
1	Lack of funding is a major challenge for community-based schools.	3.13	0.88	3.20	0.88
2	These schools have inadequate infrastructure and facilities.	3.17	0.85	3.23	0.85
3	There is a shortage of qualified teachers in community-based schools.	3.13	0.85	3.20	0.85
4	Community-based schools have difficulty retaining staff.	3.03	0.88	3.13	0.88

Item	Statement	Nigeria		South Africa	
		Mean	S.D	Mean	S.D
5	Policy and government support for community-based schools is insufficient.	3.07	0.88	3.17	0.88

Research Question 5: To what extent are communities and local stakeholders involved in the management and administration of community-based schools?

Table 5 indicates a strong level of involvement by communities and local stakeholders in the management and administration of community-based schools in both Nigeria and South Africa. Respondents agree that local communities actively participate in school management (Nigeria: 3.10; South Africa: 3.20) and that parents contribute resources or time to support school operations (Nigeria: 3.13; South Africa: 3.27). Participation in decision-making processes by community members (Nigeria: 3.07; South Africa: 3.17) and support from traditional and local leaders (Nigeria: 3.03; South Africa: 3.10) are also evident. The highest mean scores were recorded for stakeholder engagement improving accountability and effectiveness (Nigeria: 3.20; South Africa: 3.30), highlighting the positive impact of inclusive governance. Overall, the findings suggest a meaningful and beneficial involvement of communities and local stakeholders in the operation of community-based schools.

Table 5.

Descriptive analysis of the extent to which communities and local stakeholders are involved in the management and administration of community-based schools

Item	Statement	Nigeria		South Africa	
		Mean	S.D	Mean	S.D
1	The local community is actively involved in managing community-based schools.	3.10	0.89	3.20	0.85
2	Parents contribute resources or time to support the school.	3.13	0.88	3.27	0.83
3	Community members participate in school decision-making processes.	3.07	0.90	3.17	0.88
4	Traditional and local leaders support school governance and activities.	3.03	0.90	3.10	0.89
5	Stakeholder engagement improves school accountability and effectiveness.	3.20	0.85	3.30	0.82

Research Question 6: What policy frameworks exist to support community-based education initiatives in Nigeria and South Africa?

Table 6 shows that while policy frameworks exist to support community-based education initiatives in both Nigeria and South Africa, their effectiveness and clarity vary. Respondents in both countries moderately agree that government policies support community-based education (Nigeria: 2.90; South Africa: 3.10) and that national education plans recognise such schools (Nigeria: 2.93; South Africa: 3.17). However, perceptions of financial or material support from government agencies are lower (Nigeria: 2.87; South Africa: 3.07), and concerns about the effectiveness and consistency of policy implementation persist (Nigeria: 2.63; South Africa: 2.87). Legal protections for community-based schools also received modest ratings (Nigeria: 2.77; South Africa: 2.97).

Table 6.

Descriptive analysis of the existing policy frameworks that support community-based education initiatives in Nigeria and South Africa

Item	Statement	Nigeria		South Africa	
		Mean	S.D	Mean	S.D
1	There are clear government policies supporting community-based education.	2.90	0.95	3.10	0.89

2	Government agencies provide financial or material support to these schools.	2.87	0.96	3.07	0.90
3	Policy implementation on rural education is effective and consistent.	2.63	0.99	2.87	0.93
4	Community-based schools are recognised in national education plans.	2.93	0.94	3.17	0.85
5	There are legal provisions protecting community-based schools' rights.	2.77	0.97	2.97	0.91

The findings suggest that while South Africa appears to have slightly stronger policy support, both countries need to strengthen and implement policies more consistently to promote and safeguard community-based education in rural areas.

Testing of hypotheses

Hypothesis 1: There is no significant difference between Nigeria and South Africa in the level of access to education provided by community-based schools in rural areas.

Table 7.

t-test analysis of the difference between Nigeria and South Africa in the level of access to education provided by community-based schools in rural areas

Variable	N	Mean	S.D	df	T	p-value
Nigeria	150	3.04	0.60	298	2.37	0.019
South Africa	150	2.88	0.50			

The results in Table 7 present a t-test analysis comparing the level of access to education provided by community-based schools in rural areas of Nigeria and South Africa. With a t-value of 2.37 and a p-value of 0.019, the difference between the two countries is statistically significant at the 0.05 level. This leads to the rejection of the null hypothesis (Hypothesis 1), which stated that there is no significant difference between Nigeria and South Africa. The findings indicate that Nigeria (Mean = 3.04) reports a higher level of access to community-based education in rural areas than South Africa (Mean = 2.88), though the difference is modest.

Hypothesis 2: There is no significant difference in the quality of education delivered by community-based schools in rural Nigeria and South Africa.

Table 8.

t-test analysis of the difference in the quality of education delivered by community-based schools in rural Nigeria and South Africa

Variable	N	Mean	S.D	df	T	p-value
Nigeria	150	2.91	0.55	298	1.64	0.102
South Africa	150	2.80	0.58			

The results in Table 8 show a t-test analysis of the difference in the quality of education delivered by community-based schools in rural Nigeria and South Africa. With a t-value of 1.64 and a p-value of 0.102, the difference is not statistically significant at the 0.05 level. Therefore, we fail to reject the null hypothesis (Hypothesis 2), which states that there is no significant difference in the quality of education delivered by community-based schools in the two countries. This suggests that, despite slight variations in mean scores (Nigeria = 2.91; South Africa = 2.80), the perceived quality of education in rural community-based schools is generally comparable between Nigeria and South Africa.

Discussion

The findings of the study reveal that access to education in rural Nigeria and South Africa remains significantly limited, largely because of poor transportation networks, long distances between homes and schools, and inadequate educational infrastructure. These persistent barriers contribute to systemic inequalities that make regular school attendance challenging for many rural children. This result aligns with UNESCO (2020), which emphasises that physical

and logistical constraints continue to hinder educational access for rural learners across sub-Saharan Africa, and with Adejare (2024), who documents the environmental constraints and shortage of educators that affect rural schools in Nigeria. In South Africa, persistent rural disadvantage has been linked to the lingering effects of historical inequalities and to recent contestation over basic education reform (Noutchie, 2025). A likely explanation for these challenges lies in the historical pattern of urban-centric investment in education infrastructure, which has left many rural areas severely under-resourced. The implications of these disparities are far-reaching: continued limited access to education in rural areas undermines progress towards Sustainable Development Goal 4, deepens social inequality and hinders long-term economic development. The pattern is also consistent with evidence from northern Nigeria that enrolment often masks irregular attendance (Humphreys et al., 2015), and with South African evidence that rural schools carry a disproportionate share of the system's learning deficits (Spaull, 2013). Improving access in rural areas therefore requires attention not only to the availability of schools but also to the conditions that allow children to attend regularly and learn effectively.

The findings of the study reveal that community-based schools play a significant role in reducing educational disparities by boosting enrolment and supporting marginalised rural learners in both Nigeria and South Africa. This can be linked to their accessibility, cultural relevance and strong community engagement. These schools are often situated within the communities they serve, which helps to eliminate barriers such as long travel distances and unfamiliar learning environments. This is consistent with the view that community-based schools, because they are rooted in the social and cultural life of the communities they serve, are well positioned to deliver inclusive education aligned with local values (Kristina et al., 2006), and with evidence that community ownership of schools in rural Nigeria supports enrolment among low-income farming families (Oke & Adeoye, 2019). However, Babatimehin et al. (2025) show that gaps in teachers' assessment knowledge persist in Nigerian secondary schools, which suggests that, without adequate oversight and support, community-based schools may struggle to maintain consistent quality. When properly supported, community-based schools can serve as effective instruments for achieving universal basic education. Their success depends on supportive policies that promote quality assurance, teacher training and sustainable funding mechanisms. Ultimately, this finding reinforces the importance of community-driven approaches in fulfilling the aims of Sustainable Development Goal 4, which calls for inclusive, equitable and quality education for all, particularly in rural and marginalised settings. At the same time, Bray (2003) cautions that reliance on community resources can widen inequalities between communities with different levels of wealth and organisational capacity, which underlines the importance of state support for the poorest rural communities.

The study found that the quality of education in community-based schools is comparable to that of government-run rural schools, largely owing to the presence of trained teachers and supportive learning environments. This suggests that localised efforts can help to close gaps in education quality. This finding aligns with Adalakun et al. (2026), who emphasise that effective monitoring and supervision strengthen teacher commitment and classroom practice. However, Chacha and Tangi (2023) caution that stakeholder participation in improving teaching and learning is constrained by limited resources and weak coordination, which can undermine educational outcomes. The implication of these findings is clear: with proper policy support and targeted investment, community-based schools have the potential to serve as effective complements to government schools in rural areas, helping to improve educational equity and learning outcomes in underserved communities. Evidence from Kenya suggests that such quality gains are most likely where communities are equipped to monitor teachers and hold them to account (Duflo et al., 2015). In South Africa, however, the persistent difficulty of attracting qualified teachers to rural schools (du Plessis & Mestry, 2019) indicates that

community commitment alone cannot compensate for structural shortages in the teaching workforce, and that teacher recruitment and retention incentives remain essential.

The study further found that community-based schools in both countries face substantial challenges, including inadequate funding, poor infrastructure, shortages of qualified teachers, difficulties in retaining staff and insufficient government support. These challenges closely mirror those reported for rural schools more generally. Adejare (2024) documents how environmental constraints and the shortage of educators undermine rural schooling in Nigeria, while du Plessis and Mestry (2019) show that rural schools in South Africa find it difficult to attract and retain qualified teachers because of isolation, inadequate housing and limited professional development opportunities. Chacha and Tangi (2023) similarly identify resource constraints and weak coordination as barriers to effective stakeholder participation in improving teaching and learning. The consistency of these challenges across contexts suggests that they are structural rather than incidental. Community-based schools often emerge precisely in the areas where public investment is weakest, and they consequently inherit the infrastructural and staffing deficits of their surroundings. As Bray (2003) notes, the capacity of communities to finance and sustain schools varies considerably, so that reliance on local contributions can leave the poorest communities with the least adequately resourced schools. Addressing these challenges therefore requires public investment that is deliberately targeted at the communities with the greatest need.

The study revealed that active involvement of local communities and stakeholders in managing community-based schools leads to greater accountability and improved school effectiveness. Supporting this, Murugi and Mugwe (2023) highlight how the engagement of parents and other stakeholders in school leadership fosters a strong sense of ownership, which drives efforts to improve schools and mobilise resources. Chikoko (2008) similarly shows that parent governors can contribute meaningfully to school governance in Zimbabwe. However, Mncube (2009) cautions that in South Africa many parents remain uncertain about their role in school governing bodies and that their participation is often limited in practice. This suggests that stakeholder involvement needs capacity building and clearly defined roles to lead to positive outcomes. Comparative evidence supports this conclusion. Participation linked to established local institutions has been shown to improve learning (Pradhan et al., 2014), whereas participatory structures that exist mainly on paper produce few benefits (Banerjee et al., 2010). Effective community involvement also depends on school leaders prepared to work collaboratively with parents and community members, making principals' professional development an important complement to community participation (Mestry, 2017).

The study found that existing policy frameworks provide some support for community-based education in both countries, with slightly stronger perceived support in South Africa, but that both need stronger implementation and support mechanisms. This aligns with Ogunode and Adah (2020), who argue that although Nigeria has educational policies in place, poor execution, insufficient funding and weak institutional oversight limit their effectiveness. UNESCO (2020) similarly stresses that policy commitments to inclusion do not lead to real progress without adequate resource allocation, monitoring and accountability. These findings imply that governments must move beyond policy statements and invest in capacity building, ongoing evaluation, and improved coordination among agencies to make community-based education sustainable and impactful, especially in underserved rural areas. For Nigeria, policy support is likely to be most effective where it recognises and works with the religious and community institutions that already educate many rural children, rather than treating them as outside the formal system (Antoninis, 2014).

The study revealed that Nigeria has significantly greater access to education through community-based schools than South Africa. This finding is consistent with evidence that community ownership of schools in rural Nigeria supports enrolment, particularly among low-income families (Oke & Adeoye, 2019). Nevertheless, given that South Africa's more structured

education system might be expected to produce higher access, national examination data continue to show performance gaps between under-resourced and better-resourced schools (DBE, 2023). This difference likely reflects Nigeria's more flexible, adaptive grassroots educational models, which can respond directly to local needs, while South Africa's centralised policies may not always fit the realities of rural communities. This suggests that South Africa could benefit from adopting more decentralised, community-driven approaches alongside its formal system. Meanwhile, Nigeria should focus on improving the quality and sustainability of its expanding access strategies to ensure lasting impact. This interpretation should nevertheless be treated with caution, because higher reported access through community-based schools does not necessarily imply higher learning; in both countries, the challenge of translating participation into learning remains central (Kremer et al., 2013).

In contrast to the difference in access, the second hypothesis showed no statistically significant difference between the two countries in the perceived quality of education delivered by community-based schools. This result suggests that, despite their different histories and governance arrangements, community-based schools in rural Nigeria and South Africa face broadly similar constraints on quality, particularly in teacher supply, learning materials, and infrastructure. Evidence also suggests that expanding participation in schooling does not automatically raise learning, and that quality improvements depend on how teaching is organised and supported in the classroom (Kremer et al., 2013). In South Africa, the concentration of low learning outcomes in poorer schools (Spaull, 2013) indicates that quality challenges are deeply embedded in the rural and low-income segment of the system, and community-based schools operating in these contexts are unlikely to escape them without sustained support. For both countries, the absence of a significant difference in quality therefore points to a shared agenda centred on teacher development, instructional resources and the systematic monitoring of learning outcomes.

Taken together, the findings point to a consistent pattern. Community-based schools in both countries are perceived to widen access, to provide education of a quality broadly comparable with that of government-run rural schools, and to benefit from active community involvement. Yet these contributions are constrained by inadequate infrastructure, shortages of qualified teachers, limited funding and uneven policy implementation. This pattern reflects a broader tension identified in the literature: community participation can make schools more responsive and accountable, but it cannot substitute for the resources and institutional support that only the state can provide at scale (Bray, 2003; Duflo et al., 2015). The comparative results further suggest that the two countries face mirror-image challenges. Nigeria appears to have mobilised community energies more extensively, but within a weaker policy and resource environment, whereas South Africa has stronger formal policy frameworks but less extensive community engagement in rural schooling. Bridging this gap requires combining the flexibility of community initiative with the predictability and equity of public provision.

The findings also have implications for citizenship and civic education. Community participation in school governance is a form of active citizenship, through which parents, traditional leaders, and other community members exercise responsibility for the public good and hold institutions to account. When such participation is meaningful, it can strengthen trust between communities and the state and model democratic practices of deliberation and shared decision-making for learners (Mncube, 2009). When it is merely formal, or when it places disproportionate burdens on poor communities, it risks reinforcing exclusion rather than reducing it (Banerjee et al., 2010; Bray, 2003). The findings also have implications for citizenship and civic education. Community participation in school governance is a form of active citizenship, through which parents, traditional leaders, and other community members exercise responsibility for the public good and hold institutions to account. When such participation is meaningful, it can strengthen trust between communities and the state and model democratic practices of deliberation and shared decision-making for learners (Mncube, 2009). When it is merely formal, or when it places disproportionate burdens on poor

communities, it risks reinforcing exclusion rather than reducing it (Banerjee et al., 2010; Bray, 2003). Community-based schools can therefore be understood as sites where citizens and the state negotiate their relationship in rural areas, and strengthening them matters not only for educational access but also for the broader project of building inclusive, participatory democratic communities in Nigeria and South Africa.

Implications for policy and practice

The findings have several implications for policy and practice. First, governments in both countries should treat community-based schools as partners in the public education system rather than temporary substitutes. This implies formal registration and recognition, predictable financial support for the poorest communities, and inclusion of community-based schools in national data systems so that their enrolment, attendance and learning outcomes can be monitored. Second, support for community participation should focus on functional rather than formal involvement. School committees and governing bodies need training, access to information about school performance and clear responsibilities if their participation is to translate into greater accountability and better teaching. Third, teacher supply in rural areas requires targeted measures, including rural allowances, housing, structured mentoring and access to continuing professional development, so that community-based schools are not left to rely on under-qualified or unsupported staff.

Fourth, the comparison between the two countries suggests opportunities for mutual learning. Nigeria's experience shows how flexible, community-driven provision can extend access where the state is weak, while South Africa's more developed regulatory and data systems show how quality assurance and accountability can be organised at scale. A deliberate exchange of practice, for example through regional networks of education officials, researchers and community organisations, could help each country to adopt the strengths of the other while avoiding its weaknesses. Finally, community-based education should be integrated more broadly into rural development planning, since improvements in transport, water, electricity and digital connectivity directly affect whether children can attend school and whether teachers are willing to work in rural communities.

Teacher education institutions also have a role to play. Pre-service programmes could include structured placements in rural and community-based schools, so that new teachers gain experience of rural contexts and are better prepared to work in them. In-service programmes, delivered through partnerships between universities, education departments and community organisations, could provide continuing support to teachers already working in community-based schools, with particular attention to multi-grade teaching, the use of local languages and contexts in instruction, and the assessment of learning. Such measures would help to ensure that the access gains achieved through community-based schools are matched by improvements in the quality of the education they provide.

Limitations and directions for future research

This study has several limitations to consider when interpreting its findings. First, the data are based on respondents' perceptions collected through a structured questionnaire, and perceptions of access and quality may differ from objectively measured attendance, completion and learning outcomes. Second, the sample of 300 respondents drawn from three purposively selected rural communities in each country does not permit generalisation to all rural areas of Nigeria and South Africa, both of which are internally diverse. Third, the cross-sectional design captures conditions at a single point in time and cannot establish whether the observed differences between the two countries are stable or causal. Fourth, community-based schools in the two countries differ in legal status, ownership, and relationship to the state, which limits the comparability of the institutions examined.

Future research could address these limitations in several ways. Studies that combine survey data with administrative records, school observations and learning assessments would

allow perceptions to be compared with measured outcomes. Longitudinal designs could follow cohorts of learners in community-based and government schools to examine retention, progression and achievement over time. Qualitative research, including interviews and focus groups with parents, learners, teachers and traditional leaders, could illuminate how community participation actually operates in school governance and how power is distributed within communities. Finally, experimental or quasi-experimental evaluations of specific forms of support, such as training for school committees, rural teacher incentives or targeted grants, would provide stronger evidence on what makes community-based schools effective in different national contexts.

Conclusion

This study shows that community-based schools are a practical way to improve educational access in rural communities when supported by both local participation and effective government policies. It further shows that the success of these schools depends on the social, economic, and policy environment in which they operate. By comparing Nigeria and South Africa, the study provides a broader understanding of how different national contexts influence the effectiveness of community-based education. The comparison also shows that access and quality must be considered together: community-based schools have extended educational opportunities in rural areas, but their contribution to learning depends on qualified teachers, functional community participation and reliable state support. Strengthening these conditions offers a realistic pathway for both countries to reduce rural educational disadvantage and to advance the commitment of Sustainable Development Goal 4 to inclusive and equitable quality education for all.

Beyond its specific findings, the study contributes to the comparative literature on community participation in education by showing that the same institutional form can play different roles in different national contexts. In Nigeria, community-based schools appear to fill gaps left by limited state provision, while in South Africa they operate alongside a more extensive but unevenly effective public system. Recognising these differences is essential for designing policies that build on the strengths of community initiative without shifting the responsibility for rural education from the state to the communities that are least able to bear it.

Recommendations

Based on the findings of this study, it is recommended that the Nigerian government strengthen the implementation of policies supporting community-based schools through increased funding, improved rural school infrastructure, and stronger monitoring mechanisms to enhance their effectiveness and sustainability. In South Africa, efforts should focus on expanding community participation in school governance while sustaining existing policy support for rural education. Both countries should invest in continuous teacher professional development and establish regular monitoring and evaluation systems to improve the quality of education provided by community-based schools. In addition, Nigeria and South Africa should strengthen collaboration by sharing successful practices in community-based education to enhance educational access and quality in rural communities.

Authors' contributions

[Insert authors' contributions here]

Competing interests

The authors declare no conflict of interest.

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Ethics Approval

This study was conducted in accordance with ethical principles for research involving human participants. Participation was voluntary, informed consent was obtained from every participant prior to data collection, and respondents were assured of confidentiality and anonymity.

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