

**Increasing Youth Voice in decision making through balancing power in School-based Management Committee in Nigeria**

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**Abstract:** Research has shown that youth voice in decision-making has the potentials to profit the youth themselves, the adults as well as the organization. However, most of the available research focuses on the outcome and not the process of youth voice in decision-making. In addition, the youth voice from Africa is “silent”, as limited research focusing on youth voice in decision-making comes from the continent. This paper is a qualitative study that employed multiple case study method to examine how youth voice in decision making is increased through youth-adult partnership in a school-based management committee. The findings show that developing mutual respect among members, developing new relationship between members, sharing responsibilities among members, providing adequate representation for youth, and building the capacity of members are crucial strategies for increasing youth voice in SBMC.

**Key words:** Youth voice. Power balance. Youth-adult partnership. School-based Management Committee.

**Introduction:** Researchers have come up with numerous ways of describing youth involvement in organizational decision-making including: youth governance, youth on board, youth participation, youth action, youth infusion, youth inclusion, youth as resources, youth organizing youth-as-partners, youth engagement, and, youth voice (Tarifa, 2006). All these terms have something in common, which is that they describes forms of youth participation in organizations and how they make contributions. The concept of youth voice refers to the many ways in which youth actively partake in the process of making decisions that affect their lives and those of their peers (Fielding, 2001). It is an essential element of identity development that develops through continuing interaction not just between youth and adults, but also between youth and their peers, who encourage self-expression and foster respect for the opinions and ideas of others (Krueger, 2005)

Several studies have shown that adults are often hesitant when it comes to youth having significant roles in decision-making (Zeldin, 2004). For a positive and equitable relationships to be developed between youth and adults, however, this power imbalance within organizations needs to be addressed. Power balance can be achieved through moving away from behavioral structures and practices that seek to control young people, toward more flexible environments in which youth

feel safe and are able to express their views and ideas freely (Kirby, Lanyon, Cronin, & Sinclair, 2003).

One of the most common practices of involving youth and adult members of communities in the management of basic education is the School-based Management Committee. The SBMC model, now a global phenomenon, denotes the transfer of authority in decision-making from government to individual schools with community and parent participation (Parker & Raihani, 2011; Barnett, 2012). The implementation of SBMC in Nigeria started in 2005 and today, the program is being implemented in all primary and secondary schools in the country (UNICEF/FME, 2012) with the aim of “providing an avenue for all stakeholders to participate in school governance. Including all means that the women and young people, and other community members who may not generally have a strong voice, also participate” (Kano State Ministry of Education, 2012).

Even though youth and adults relate in SBMC for almost a decade, most of what is available in the literature about SBMC in Nigeria pertains to outcomes (Ogundele & Adelabu, 2009; Adediran, 2012) while less is known about the process of including and increasing youth voice in the committees. It is important to study the process of youth voice in SBMC in view of the constructive role youth play in the administration of education (Gershberg, 1999), and thus, the focus of the current study.

**Methods:** This is a multiple case study involving two School-based Management Committees in Niger state Nigeria, selected as a unit of analysis on the basis of uniqueness (success) (Merriam, 2009) in the implementation of the program. The two SBMCs were set up in 2009 and were said to be among the few “functional” SBMCs (Okojie, 2011), which are now models for other SBMCs in the state. A total of nineteen members of the two SBMCs were involved as participants in the study, including thirteen youth between the ages 13 and 24, and six adults age 40 and above. Interviews, document analysis and observations were used as data collection techniques, with semi-structured interview as the primary data source for the study. Nvivo qualitative research software was used in the management of data that helped in the analysis.

**Findings:** The first study objective was to understand the power imbalance between youth and adults in the SBMCs. The analysis led to the identification of challenges to youth voice including: Negative attitude towards youth’s abilities, traditional roles of youth in the society (i.e. that youth were to be seen and not to be heard) and the age difference between youth and adults. Others

include inadequate youth representation on the committees, lack of adequate knowledge about youth's rights to be heard, and training on how to work on the committee were also mentioned by the youth and adult participants. These challenges alienated the youth from participation in the committee.

The second objective led to the identification of strategies through which committees were able to transcend power imbalance and brought about increased youth voice. The analysis of the data resulted in five common themes relating to the process of balancing power between youth and adults: mutual respect among members, developing new relationship between youth and adult committee members, sharing responsibilities among committee members, reorganization of the committees to achieve adequate representation by youth, and building the capacity of members.

The committee members included in the study used mutual respect as a key to balancing power between youth and adults, which has in turn increased the chances of youth to have a say in decision making. Both the youth and adults interviewed spoke of "respect" for one another, which led to the creation of an enabling environment for youth voice to thrive in the committees. This finding is in line with Mitra (2008), who identified developing mutual respect and responsibilities, and emphasizing respect and trust among group members (Mitra, 2009), as instrumental in enabling youth voice in school-base youth-adult partnership.

Developing new relationships between youth and adults was another effective strategy. Both youth and adults stated that when they were in the committee for meetings or any other activities, their relationship changed from student-teacher or parent-child, to simply "committee members" and this has helped tremendously in balancing traditional power relations. This finding resonates with Zeldin, Petrokubi, and MacNeil, (2008), who suggested that youth and adults should take on new roles and responsibilities to promote youth-adult relationships in organizations.

Another strategy resulting from the analysis was reorganizing the committees to account for adequate representation of youth membership. Consequently, youth membership on the committees represented the pupils of the schools, former students, and the youth organizations in the communities. This led to a more equitable representation both in number and in coverage, which is important in increases the voice of those youth that are most affected by decisions (The Alliance & UNICEF, 2013).

In line with Mitra's study of youth-adult partnership in American school (2008), sharing responsibilities among youth and adults members of the committee contributed substantially to creating space for youth voice. The findings show that Assigning responsibilities to the youth challenged them to become active so as not to fail in the responsibilities bestowed on them, and that helped dispel the negative perception adults had about youth, thus developing their confidence in the youth's abilities to discharge other responsibilities.

Participants also acknowledged that they were able to bring about greater power balance on the committees through workshops and other trainings, which enabled both youth and adults to acquired communication and organizational skills (Mitra, 2009), and understand and appreciate youth's right to participate (Davey, 2010). As a result, youth come forward to exercise this right and the adults provide the youth with the space to be heard.

**Conclusion:** When it comes to participation in decision making, power imbalance between youth and adult members is inherent (Davey, 2010). Although it is rarely ever counterbalanced, it is better to acknowledge that it exists rather than pretend it does not, because, the very acknowledgement of it often leads to an examination of practices which, in turn, reduces its damaging effects on the youth (Kellett, 2011). The results of this study have confirmed the existence of power differences between youth and adults in two SBMCs in Nigeria. However, the committees have been able to increase the youth's opportunities to participate in decision making through the dismantling of those structures and practices that limit youth voice. In their place, they further work together to create more flexible environments and practices to help young people to express their voice and influence decisions.

**Recommendation:** Since this study is the first to explore youth voice in SBMCs in Nigeria, more research is needed in related areas such as how members of SBMC create opportunities that empower the youth to exercise their voice in SBMC, and the knowledge and skills SBMC members need to better support youth voice in decision making.

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