Socio-Cultural Barriers to Youth Voice in Nigerian School-Based Management Committees: A Multi-Case Analysis

Bashiru Bako Umar[1], Steven Eric Krauss[1,2]*, Seyedali Ahrari[2], Asnarulkhadi Abu Samah[3] and Jamaliah Abdul Hamid[2]

[1]Institute for Social Science Studies, Universiti Putra Malaysia, Serdang, Selangor, Malaysia
[2]Faculty of Educational Studies, Universiti Putra Malaysia, Serdang, Selangor, Malaysia
[3]Faculty of Human Ecology, Universiti Putra Malaysia, Serdang, Selangor, Malaysia

ABSTRACT

This study explores the challenges of implementing youth voice in school-based management committees (SBMC) in Nigeria. SBMC are a form of youth-adult partnership that involve communities in the management of local primary schools. The program aims to provide community members, including vulnerable groups such as young people who traditionally lack a voice in community leadership structures, opportunities to partake in school governance. The current study used a qualitative case study approach by interviewing 19 committee members from two SBMCs in Niger State. Thematic analysis from interviews revealed that differential treatment of people of different ages, traditional power structures, the lack of a participatory culture in decision-making, and conventional role divisions impeded the practice of youth voice in the early stages of the SBMCs. The findings provide important insight from an understudied cultural setting on the need to consider sociocultural barriers to youth voice in community-based initiatives.

Keywords: Nigeria, organizational decision-makin, school-based commissions of leadership, youth voice, youth-adult partnership

INTRODUCTION

The focus of youth programs has shifted in recent years to a greater emphasis on youth inclusion in decision-making processes, a key aspect of positive youth development (Cahill & Dadvand, 2018; Zaremohzzabieh et al., 2016). This is in response to the view that ascribes young people as resources to individual,

organizational and community development through which human, organizational, and community growth is promoted (Bruna et al., 2020; Li & Shek, 2020; The Forum for Youth Investment, 2001). In line with this approach, government agencies and non-governmental organizations are now including aspects of youth governance as an essential part of their operations (Zeldin, 2004). Youth working in collaboration with adults - otherwise known as youth-adult partnership (Y-AP) - gives youth and adults the opportunity to make important decisions to bring about change in their organizations and communities (Zeldin et al., 2011; To et al., 2020).

In many countries, however, there remains a negative perception about young people's ability to be meaningful partners in organizational decision-making. As such, youth are consistently portrayed by adult-led institutions as disengaged and deficient in public decision-making capabilities, thus relegating them to being beneficiaries of services rather than allies (Checkoway, 2006). Studies have shown that adults are often not keen to participate together with youth in governance because of adults' previous experiences (Tarifa, 2006). Adults tend to resort to authoritarian roles when dealing with youth, often mirroring how they were treated when they were adolescents (Zeldin, 2004). As a result, young people remain segregated from adults and are kept ignorant of many important issues that often directly affect young people's lives (Krauss et al., 2014; Winkler, 2013).

Much of recent history is colored by youth-adult community relationships that stifle young people's voices and confine them to institutions that force them to depend on adults (Baker, 1999). There are indications, however, that this is changing. In the United States, for instance, several recent studies (e.g., Collura et al., 2019; Zeldin et al., 2007; Yu et al., 2020) have reported that more youth are being involved in important decisions in schools, youth and community organizations. In several countries, politics is used as a means through which youth are involved in policy decision-making; youth parliaments provide members with the opportunity to pursue politics as a pathway to affect change on behalf of their constituents (Fuks & Casalecchi, 2012; Patrikios & Shephard, 2014).

In line with these trends, scholars are beginning to devote greater attention to the generation of theory related to youth participation and its role in healthy development and thriving (Cahill & Dadvand, 2018; Hart, 2008; Li & Julian, 2012). However, there is a dearth of empirical studies focusing on the cultural differences in young people's participation as nearly all the available studies have been carried out in Western sociocultural settings (Krauss et al., 2014). Since different cultures define youth participation and involvement quite differently (Fletcher, 2006), especially in public spheres of influence, Hart (2008) and others had advocated for research with a cultural bias, particularly from Africa and Asia so as "to correct the normalizing

and universalizing tendencies" of current scholarly work in this area. Against this backdrop, this study explored the cultural challenges of the practice of youth voice in Nigerian School-based Management Committees (SBMCs).

Youth Voice

Youth voice is often defined as the views, thoughts, participation, and leadership of young people in higher institutions, colleges, and governments (Havlicek et al., 2016). Youth voice often goes by related terms including "youth interaction," "youth intervention," "youth participation," "youth decision-making," "youth governance," "active citizenship," and "youth leadership" (Mitra et al., 2013). Youth voice refers to a mechanism that offers young people opportunities to share their thoughts, make contributions, and ensure that they are regarded as valued partners in the planning and executing of programs and activities in which they are involved (Maynard, 2008). Some scholars define 'youth voice' as a role for young people (Mitra, 2008; Mitra et al., 2013), while others conceptualize it as a tool for building organizational capability (Zellerbach Family Foundation, 2011) or an aspect of fruitful knowledge (Fredericks et al., 2001).

Youth voice also involves programs in school environments that encourage adults to help young people to improve policies and pedagogical practices (Mitra et al., 2013). Research indicates that youth, organizations, and neighborhoods reap many benefits when young people influence the decision-making process (Caringi et al., 2013). In schools, Mack (2012) correlated youth voice with students shaping choices about what they learnt and how they learnt. Young people gain significant experience and learning through their participation in intergenerational relationships, which have been shown to benefit both organizations and the community (Tarifa, 2006).

Challenges to Youth Voice in Decision-Making

Young people have always struggled for their voice to be heard and acted upon (Kellett, 2011). This is because of a number of structures, behaviors, and practices that create power imbalances between youth and adults, causing young people to feel unsafe to freely voice their opinions and engage in meaningful decision-making (Kirby et al., 2003). Recent studies have begun to explore factors that pose a challenge to youth voice in decision-making. Preference towards adults' views resulting in discrimination against youth involvement in decision-making is a result of cultural, structural and attitudinal factors (Collins et al., 2016; D'Agostino & Visser, 2010; Lekies et al., 2009). In Nigeria, one study investigating the lack of youth participation in politics found that adult domination and subsequent discrimination against youth is a result of both attitudinal and structural forces. Adults often feel threatened by youth inclusion in decision-making. As a result, structures are established in such a way that do not accommodate youth in the decision-making process (British Council, 2010). Mokwena

(2006) identified ideological factors as also responsible for the suppression of youth voice, including the basic belief that young people could not be equal partners with adults in organizations due to their age.

Culture describes a specific community's beliefs, values, habits, norms, visions, systems, and symbols (Peretomode, 2012). The culture of homes, schools, organizations and government in many societies often acts as a barrier to youth voice. Golombek and Little (2002) affirmed that youth voice became challenging when youth worked with adults in organizations that were characterized by unsupportive cultural practices such as members "operating within an autocratic or traditional style of leadership" that did not accommodate or cherish democratic principles. The current study focuses on similar cultural barriers that act as a barrier to youth voice in Nigerian SBMCs.

School-Based Management (SBM)

School-based management is the most common form of educational decentralization practiced around the world (Bandur, 2012; Drury, 1999). It is a management structure created to manage people, materials and other resources at the school level (UNICEF/FME, 2012). The overall aim of SBM is to decentralize school governance by empowering local communities to develop school management efficiency and enhance students' academic progress (Triwiyanto & Juharyanto, 2017). The program was introduced in the 1980s to address the failure of centralized public-

school administration by bringing together stakeholders such as school personnel, parents, and other members of the host community into the administration of the school, so as to make it more accountable and flexible in meeting local needs (Shatkin & Gershberg, 2007). The program is also referred as site-based decision-making, site-based management, autonomous schools, shared decision-making, self-managing schools, and school-based decision-making (Bandur, 2012; Parker & Raihani, 2011). Countries such as Indonesia, Australia, El Salvador, Hong Kong, New Zealand, Israel, Kenya, Nigeria, and Brazil have used SBM as a prominent feature of public-school management (Santibañez et al., 2014).

SBM has been a popular strategy in line with the broader policy movement towards decentralisation in public school management introduced in many developing countries over the past 30 years. Advocates contend that SBM implementation has empowered school stakeholders such as parents, teachers and other community members through active decision-making, which has led to increased participation and ownership of schools, and greater student achievement (Bandur, 2012). However, while evidence demonstrating the positive effects of SBM on school management and learning outcomes exists (Duflo et al., 2007; Jelenic et al., 2019), results are mixed (Yamada, 2014. Furthermore, the extent of community participation is contested. Several studies have mentioned a variety of barriers to the active involvement of community members in SBM including lack

of role clarity, funding challenges, power struggle between members, and inadequate training of members (Bandur, 2012; Barnett, 2012; Yamada, 2014). In their study of SBM in Indonesia, Parker and Raihani (2011) cited cultural resistance to change as a major hinderance to the effective operation of SBM.

Research Context

Since the launch of the National Youth Policy in 1981, the Nigerian government has worked to improve the quality of education and learning outcomes. Despite the government's attempts to provide high quality education to school students at the level of basic education, the conditions of the schools have deteriorated and student achievement has declined (Bandur, 2012). As a result, the Nigerian Government has started to reform the management of education through the institution of SBMCs. In Nigeria, SBMCs provide training for committee members, introduce policies to enhance the quality of primary schools, and engage in ongoing assessment of the challenges facing the successful functioning of SBMCs (Peretomode, 2012). However, critics contend that too many SBMCs have not provided the youth/student members authentic opportunities for voice in the committees' decision-making processes (Bandur, 2012).

The implementation of SBM in Nigeria started with a policy guideline issued by the National Council on Education (NCE) that the program should serve as the main channel through which community members, including vulnerable groups such as young people and women, can partake in school governance and support school services (UNICEF/FME, 2012; Kano State Ministry of Education, 2012; Calder, 2015). To date, researchers have mostly focused on implementation strategies and effectiveness of the program in improving student performance (Akinola, 2009; Ayeni & Ibukun, 2013; UNICEF/FME, 2012). Calder (2015) observed that initially, young people's inclusion in SBMCs in Nigeria was "not accepted" and involvement of women was "highly constrained," specifically in the country's northern states. However, the researcher provided few details around equity in the process of SBMC implementation.

Calder (2015) pointed out that the participation of young people in the SBMCs in Nigeria was not readily embraced due to age-related power-distance, attributed to Nigerian culture, which was largely collective in nature. Moreover, despite a high level of awareness of their rights within the country and the SBMCs in particular, many Nigerian students still lack opportunities to take part in the SBMC decision-making process. This has led to many students feeling alienated and increasingly frustrated with their experiences (British Council, 2010). To begin to map a way forward for the successful implementation of Nigerian SBMCs in relation to their core objectives of community participation, there is a need to explore the barriers to youth voice in the context of the decision-making process of Nigerian SBMCs.

METHODS

While research interest in youth voice has increased, the body of literature in this field is still relatively small. Thus, we tried to understand barriers to youth voice through an in-depth analysis of young people's experiences, rather than proving or refuting predetermined hypotheses (Ahrari et al., 2019; Krauss et al., 2020). Thus, a qualitative approach was considered more suitable for providing direct access to students' and adults' subjective experiences (Taylor et al., 2015).

Participants and Procedures

To gain a holistic perspective of the study context and research questions, the research team interviewed young people and adults from two SBMCs, which were chosen from hundreds of SBMCs throughout Nigeria. The chosen SBMCs served public schools located in the state of Niger. The two Committees were selected based on their record of successful implementation. The two SBM committees were formed in 2009 and were considered two of the few 'working' SBM committees in the world (Okojie, 2011). Young people and adults from the two SBMCs were invited using purposeful sampling, and interviews were performed at their respective schools. First, school administrators classified possible young people and adults, and snowball sampling was used to find additional sample participants. Semi-structured, in-depth face-to-face interviews were conducted with 19 committee members, including youth and adult members (Table 1).

For ensuring anonymity of participants, the study used pseudonyms in the reporting of the findings. The other requirements for choosing study participants were the age of participants, SBMC membership, and length of involvement in the SBMC. Participants had to have been on the committee for at least two years. Participants who joined the SBMCs immediately after their establishment were given priority since they were more acquainted with the research questions of interest. However, members who joined the committees later were also included. Data were collected using semi-structured interviews and analysis was carried out using an inductive approach. Participants were told before each interview that their participation in the research was voluntary and that they could withdraw from the study at any time. Each interview lasted for approximately one hour.

Interviews and observations were used to gather the data, with the primary method being in-depth personal interviews. Twenty-nine interviews were conducted in total. Participants were allowed to share their personal experience in the committees openly. Using thematic analysis, the data were analyzed manually. The first author read the transcripts line-by-line after the interviews were performed, following an inductive approach to explain the participants' perspectives and develop themes (Gratton & Jones, 2018). Constant comparative approach was used to compare and refine the evolving trends regarding the participants' variant experiences (Ritchie et al., 2014).

Table 1
Demographic profile of participants

No.	Pseudonym	Gender	Age	Duration	Designation	Responsibility
1	Maku	Male	14	3 Months	Head	Partner
2	Aiken	Male	14	2 Months	Head	Partner
3	Aisha	Female	13	3 Months	Head	Partner
4	Sanusi	Male	18	4 Years	Alumni	Partner
5	Halima	Female	17	3 Years	Alumni	Partner
6	Rahman	Male	17	3 Years	Alumni	Partner
7	Ibrahim	Male	16	2 Years	Alumni	Partner
8	Isah	Male	24	4 Years	Teachers	Partner
9	Abubakar	Male	23	2 Years	Artist	Partner
10	Ali	Male	25	2 Years	Philanthropist	Partner
11	Mika	Male	25	3 Years	Youth Leader	Public relations officer
12	Yunusa	Male	25	5 Years	Youth Leader	F/Secretary
13	Jummai	Female	40	5 Years	Women Leader	Treasurer
14	Yusuf	Male	52	5 Years	Community Leader	Chairman
15	Aduke	Female	42	2 Years	Headmaster	Secretary
16	Musa	Male	45	5 Years	Teacher	Partner
17	Makada	Male	44	6 Years	Headteacher	Secretary
18	Kenneth	Male	62	3 Years	Parents-Teachers Association Chairman	Partner
19	Jagaba	M	67	5 Years	Community Leader	Chairman

Data Analysis

Data analysis was carried out first through transcribing the audio recordings of participants' interviews, which were then imported into NVIVO (version 10) for management and analysis. This was followed by a series of text search and frequency word queries so as to get a sense of the data to support the coding process. Coding of each of the participants' interviews was then carried out, followed by regrouping and category development. References were made to field notes and documents analyzed during coding and categorizing of the data. Next, a series of matrix coding queries were conducted so as

to explore the intersection of categories and their attributes. This led to the discovery of the similarities and differences in how youth and adults view cultural barriers to youth voice. Finally, some of the categories were renamed and others combined to arrive at overarching themes.

RESULTS

Both youth and adult participants were asked about their experiences with the power gaps between youth and adult members at the start of the SBMCs. Data analysis identified four main themes that captured the cultural obstacles to the study participants' youth voice experiences. These themes

Table 2
Summary of themes

No.	Theme	Sub-themes
1	Differential treatment of people of different ages	- Traditional relationship - Difficulties in opposing adults' views - Imbalance of power
2	Traditional power structures	- Sacred traditional institutions - Unchallenging traditional leaders - Rigid decisions
3	Lack of participatory culture in decision-making	- Hesitation of expression - Trust adult decisions - Discourage active participation - Difficulty accepting youth decisions - Not valuing youth contributions
4	Conventional role divisions	- Distinct roles regarding decision-making - Perceived different responsibilities

were classified through data analysis as: differential treatment of people of different ages, traditional power structures, the lack of a participatory culture in decision-making, and conventional role divisions. Below, each of the four themes is presented along with its corresponding sub-themes.

Differential Treatment of People of Different Ages

Among the members of the two groups, age was a key interaction factor. In Nigerian society, young people afford older adults much respect. Early on in the Committees, this conventional bond between youth and adults played an essential role in how decisions were made. Early on, adult members expected the younger members to go along with the adults, as the latter realized that they would not be questioned. On the other hand, the youth found it impossible to challenge the adults' views, as it would be considered arrogant and disrespectful to challenge the adults. Respect does not apply

to views in this sense, but only because of the age of the person him- or herself. This reverence contributed to suppressing the youth's voice and greatly affected the balance of power in the two committees' early stages.

Sanusi, a young member of the Gunu committee (a new member of only three months at the time of data collection), said he respected all the adult committee members, especially the chairman of the committee. He said, "Well, they are older than me, and they know the council very well, too, as chairperson and assistant." This made it hard for Sanusi to express opposing views against his adult associates. He added,

> I have not been able to contest the judgment of adults like the director. I love them, too. Some of them are old enough to be my father, and I don't think I should question what my father says about his age.

Likewise, the Gunu committee's Magaji also suggested that age was a noticeable factor that increased the committees' power inequality. He said:

Since the adults were older, we young people gave the adults a chance to be in charge and manage the way things were handled in the committee as a mark of admiration. We did not speak until we were asked to talk, for example, and we also required them to speak first before we spoke.

Adult participants also confirmed that age difference led to the power imbalance that restricted youth to freely express their voice on the committees. Musa (Gwam committee) said:

You know, as people of northern Nigeria, we have respect for elders . . . youth may have their uncles, aunties, and brothers as committee members and that respect for them is there. Because of that, they may be feeling somehow to disagree with the opinion of the adult members as that may be like disrespecting the adults.

Jummai also said that:

From childhood, we learn to respect people based on their age. In my family, we learn to respect our grandparents' decision, and even my parents obeying their decisions. I think age is a serious factor

to consider. Even after we leave our family and want to have an independent life, we ask the opinion of elders from our family.

Traditional Power Structures

In Nigeria, the old-style organization is deemed holy, and so is the typical king, the institution's protector. The social, legislative, executive, and judicial repository of roles "was the conventional ruler" (Caringi et al., 2013), and his title derives from the institutions of community leadership that existed before modern Nigeria was established. While they no longer have formal political authority, these rulers still have significant control. They are held in high regard by their societies and revered, so much so that others seldom doubt their words.

With the introduction of SBMCs, the school communities' traditional representatives were required to act as chairmen of the committees (UNICEF/FME, 2012). Consequently, as opposed to the other participants, the traditional rulers in the committees exerted considerable influence. Their decisions were seldom questioned, posing a considerable obstacle for the voice of youth in committees. Mika confirmed this, a Gwam's member youth committee, who said:

The problem with someone getting more influence is that we honor our conventional titleholders and you know that at the beginning of the committee, some of them

were members. One does not want to dispute him directly in the committee, like the conventional dictator, whatever he says.

The absolute essence of the traditional ruler's power influenced the participation of the committee's young members. The involvement of traditional leaders even limited the voice of adults. One adult member of the Gunu committee, Makada, stated that:

Our royal fathers here are the traditional title holders, so we love them a lot. Even if we disagree with what the Dagaci [the traditional ruler] decides, no member can challenge it when he is the president because it is disrespectful.

He added that:

Although our society has become modern, there is still a hidden structure among the people of our society that acts as a driving force and a hidden force, and even new laws and social media cannot change this structure much.

Lack of Participatory Culture in Decision-Making

Participants also revealed the practice of not including young individuals in making collective decisions. The participants were hesitant to make any direct attempts to express themselves when they joined the committees since they felt that the adult committee members acted in their best interests. When the youths saw a need to advocate for themselves and their peers, they were ready to speak up and be heard. Ibrahim, a young member of the Gwam committee, revealed that:

I did not like going to those meetings at first. The explanation he gave was that "our instructor was there, Mr. Musa." Mr. Musa would call the head girl and me after the meetings to brief us if there was anything. "When he was pressed in the committee about the various ways in which he conveyed his views and desires, he responded," Mr. Musa used to propose to the members of the committee what we wanted.

Likewise, Rahman said that he was on the committee with his father and teachers, so there was no need to attend the meetings. He clarified further that:

When I joined the committee, I did not care to try to take steps in the committee. We do not talk because our teachers, my father [Committee Chairman], and other adults serve us, just as we do not go to meetings much, even though we go to meetings. They know our needs, after all, and they know our needs.

During the early stages of the Committees, adult members affirmed the culture of very little youth involvement in Committee decision-making. Yusuf, an

older member of the Gwam board, said that adults did not promote active youth involvement because they regarded youth as their children and students and thus felt that they were aware of the young people's needs. He clarified further that:

> *Since some of them are our girls, and some of them are our students and some of our brothers and sisters, we thought we had known the problems of youth before (at the beginning of the committee). However, we later realized that there was a need for reform, so now we are encouraging them to represent themselves.*

In addition, Kenneth said:

> *In my opinion, we, as a youth, know the problem and issues of our generation more than other people, especially adults. There is no will to hear our voice. I think it is a cultural issue in many developing countries that adults neglect young people, and they want us to obey traditional family and society rules. There is bias or mindset that cannot be changed in a short time.*

The lack of youth membership in school committees has historically made it difficult for adult members to recognize youth as equal partners in the SBMCs. Members of the two communities were not used to having young people as committee members participating in the school administration before introducing SBM. For example, the Parents-Teachers Association (PTA), which existed before the SBMC was formed, never had students or young people as members. At the outset, the mandate of the SBMCs to include youth as committee members proved troublesome for adults and made it impossible for them to recognize youth as committee members of equal standing. Adults agreed that they did not trust and respect young people's efforts and did not value their involvement. The Chairman of the PTA in Gunu, Mr. Kenneth, suggested:

> *The PTA is strictly an association of parents and teachers, but the SBM committee must be represented by pupils, alumni, and youth organizations. This was new to us and was not initially supported because we thought that the young people could not contribute anything important to the committee, like the pupils. Later, however, we understood and got used to it.*

Conventional Role Divisions

Young people and adults have historically had different positions in decision-making and transparency in Nigerian society. This, like many traditional traditions, stems from the idea that age comes from knowledge. With their physical energy, young people are also assigned physical duties, such as sweeping the complex, cutting grass, working on the farm, and running errands at home. In the early stages

of the SBMCs' work, the standard position differentiation between youth and adults in both societies manifested itself. Adults took full responsibility for decision-making at the outset, while young people were given physical tasks. Yusuf, an adult member of the Gwam committee, addressed the various positions performed by the participants at the start of the committee:

> *We felt it was difficult to offer the advice adults give to young people. The young people were then assigned the committee's physical work; they typically helped preserve the environment, create and track other school activities. Adults cannot do that, as you know, and so they mostly gave advice and made choices.*

A youth member of the Gunu committee, Yunusa, said:

> *In particular, young people have been allocated to engage in the execution of work involving physical strength. During the building of two blocks of classrooms, we provided labor in the form of digging the base, combining cement and sand, and providing blocks.*

Aduke, a female secretary, further stated that:

> *Traditionally, there is a division of roles in the environment in which we live, and everyone, young and old, respects it, and especially adults expect younger people to respect and respect local traditions, and any violation of these so-called indisputable principles by adults will not be removed.*

DISCUSSION

Culture, which has to do with the beliefs, values, habits, norms, visions, systems and symbols of a specific community, has been used to define and reinforce perspectives that discriminate against young people (Peretomode, 2012). Although biological differences between youth and adults exist, it is culture that is usually responsible for the construction and interpretation of these differences (Anderson, 2010). Thus, many societies consider young people as having a lower social status than adults in spite of the important roles youth often play in groups, denying them the opportunity to participate as equals in decision-making (The Alliance & UNICEF, 2013).

The current study found that the cultural thoughts and practices of the people comprising the committees heavily favored adults, which affected youths' ability to make an impact in committee decision-making. As illustrated in previous studies (Checkoway, 2011; Maynard, 2008), age served as a basis for power imbalance with adults being shown respect in the two communities because of their age. Thus, adult members used that veneration to their advantage by imposing their will on the youth committee members since they knew that they were not likely to be challenged. The youth found it difficult to express their views, as such

acts were perceived as being disrespectful to the adults and against the culture of the communities. It should be noted that respect in this context does not mean respect for someone's opinion, but respect for an elder as a person. However, respect for the opinion of others is indeed important for youth voice and as such desirable in a committee. On the other hand, preferential respect for an older person to the extent of restraining oneself from challenging a viewpoint detracts from committee work. The youth committee members felt deterred from voicing their opinion for fear of being seen as violating "the cultural practice of customary obedience to those 'above you': either in age or social rank" (Irabor & Omonzejele, 2009). This restraint impedes young people's progress toward becoming inclusive decision-makers.

Checkoway (2011) stated that it was challenging for youth to participate when adults saw them as "deficits" and not "resources", a view that flows from the thinking that young people, because of their age, were not as good as adults and as such needed adults to act on their behalf. This act of silencing youth stems from the negative views that adults have about the limitation of youth competencies based on age (Maynard, 2008). Often, age differences can result in a lack of collaboration, the absence of shared appreciativeness and good faith, misconceptions and biases, and lack of knowledge about the other's interests and ways of life (The Alliance & UNICEF, 2013). Although youth are less experienced than adults, youth maintain expertise and unique insights on a number of topics that concern their lives such as dealings with peers, their community, and their schools, and therefore their unique expertise in these areas can act as a critical complement to the knowledge and experience of adults (Maynard, 2008).

Previous studies have shown how school committee members from the community can provide an important form of leadership and source of social capital to such committees (Bandur, 2012; Baruth, 2013; Barnett, 2012; Mncube, 2009; Parker & Raihani, 2011; Santibañez et al., 2014). In the current study, however, the involvement of traditional rulers in the two SBMCs perpetuated power imbalance and hindered youth voice. Historically, the traditional ruler in Nigeria was the head of the traditional system of government indigenous to Nigeria since the precolonial period (Songonuga, 2015; Tonwe & Osemwota, 2013). He was responsible for executive, judicial as well as legislative powers in the community and governed autonomously. However, following Nigeria's colonization by Britain and later its independence in 1960, those functions were ceded, thereby undermining and reducing the traditional rulers' functions to an advisory and guardian role of traditions within their respective communities (Jahun, 2015; Songonuga, 2015). The legacy of power they had previously wielded still resonates among the people, however, so much so that their opinions and instructions are rarely challenged by community members. It is in recognition of this respect for traditional rulers that the government

often routes its policies and programs such as census, vaccinations, voter registration and electoral matters through the rulers (Jahun, 2015).

In deference to this aspect of the culture, the SBMC implementation guidelines require that the traditional ruler of the community becomes the chairman of the committee (UNICEF/FME, 2012). However, the incorporation of traditional rulers into the SBMC as committee chairmen did little to further youth voice because of the exigencies of youth voice. SBMCs are meant to govern according to democratic principles, which are at variance with the traditional, authoritarian style of leadership (Bandur, 2012). Instead of providing leadership and acting as a source of social capital for the committees, the traditional leaders focused on consolidating their power over the rest of the members. This, in turn, did not augur well for youth voice in particular and for the committees in general. Since committee members were viewed as 'subjects' of the traditional rulers, the members found it difficult to challenge the rulers' decisions. This posed a challenge for youth to share their views in the committees until the traditional rulers later relinquished their membership. This finding resonates with Golombek (2006), who reported that youth voice was not likely to flourish where a traditional style of leadership that was not in tune with democratic principles was used to run an organization.

In addition to the heavy-handed role and practices of the traditional rulers, the absence of a culture of youth inclusion in decision-making was also a challenge to youth voice in the committees. The non-involvement of youth is a prominent aspect of traditional Nigerian culture that runs through all the major social institutions including the family. The extended family, which is the most common family system in Nigeria, is largely collective in nature with members having strong family ties. In such families, members often consult other members -- especially the older ones – rather than rely on their personal opinion (Peretomode, 2012). Davey (2010) had argued that this type of family could lead to complacency among young members who were socialized to accept that adult's opinions were, by default, better than theirs and that adults were always in a better position to make decisions on the young member's behalf. This, therefore, denies youth the opportunity to appreciate the basis upon which decisions are made and limits their contribution to the process (Davey, 2010). Similarly, Wright (1999) had identified that, often, youth's lack of confidence in expressing their voice in a group was the result of a culture that did not provide motivation for youth participation, including lack of support at home.

In addition to the lack of participatory culture within Nigerian school governing boards was the inability of adult members to accept youth as equals in the governing process. Prior to the introduction of the SBM, adults – in general - were not used to having youth as committee members participating in the administration of the schools. For instance, the Parent-Teachers

Association, which predated the SBMC, did not have pupils or younger people as committee members. When the SBMC was introduced, the participating adults found it difficult to accept youth as their equals in committee membership. This hindered the adults' ability to support the youth and value their contributions to the committee.

The traditional role division between youth and adults constitutes a barrier to many youth voice projects (Mitra, 2008; Mitra et al., 2013). In many African families, for instance, the role of members are well-defined, and with decision-making left exclusively to adults, young people "are not allowed to speak among adults without permission and doing so can bring disgrace on the parents and punishment" (Lansdown, 2011). In a school setting, role distinction is also found to pose a problem to youth-adult projects aimed at enhancing student voice, the reason being that youth and adults often revert to their traditional roles of teacher and student: the former directs while the latter just complies (Mitra, 2007, 2008, 2009).

Similarly, the role distinctions inherent in the two communities in the current study allowed adults to assume full control of decision-making due to the belief that "wisdom comes with age", while the youth were given tasks involving physical labor. This traditional role distinction between youth and adults in both communities was manifested and maintained at the inception of the two committees whereby the adults assumed responsibility for the committees' decision-making.

It is important to note important limitations of the current study. The study results are unique to SBMCs in Niger state. The findings of SBMCs in other settings may not be commonly applicable. This is because their delimitation, sample, and cultural context restrict the generalization of qualitative study findings. Since youth voice is fairly new in school-based youth-adult partnerships in Nigeria, future work is needed that documents successful examples of youth-adult partnership within this same cultural setting. Such efforts could focus on how a balance of power can be achieved to increase youth voice despite the barriers that exist within the setting. Furthermore, the current COVID-19 pandemic raises an entirely new set of challenges for developing countries, in particular, the fate of young people who have had their education and career trajectories severely disrupted. Community-based youth-adult partnerships that provide young people with apprentice-like opportunities to learn important skills through close working relationships with adults will prove invaluable given the possibility of future limitations in education and formal skill training caused by the COVID-19 pandemic.

CONCLUSION

This study brings insight to the experience of youth voice within the context of school-based youth-adult partnerships, which is still new in Nigeria. Specifically, the study reported that the power imbalance between youth and adults that limited youth voice at

the inception of the committees was a result of culturally-related factors. The study has expanded our understanding of Y-AP -- and its barriers -- in organizations by looking at it for the first time from a Nigerian cultural setting. The findings elucidate the numerous pitfalls that traditional power relationships can play to limit youth voice, especially at the inception of Y-AP initiatives. Awareness of these potential barriers can help program planners attempting projects in similar settings.

ACKNOWLEDGEMENT

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