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Youth Empowerment Initiatives and Leadership Development in Imo State, Nigeria.

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ABSTRACT

The study focused on youth empowerment initiatives and leadership development in Imo State, Nigeria. Nigerian youths are faced with numerous challenges, including high levels of unemployment, unskillfulness, poverty, high illiteracy rate, and political disenfranchisement, which hinder the ability of young people to contribute meaningfully to the development of the country. Hence this study sought to ascertain the relationship that existed between youth empowerment initiatives and leadership development in Imo State, Nigeria. The study employed descriptive survey research design. The population of the study was 300 and its sample size was 171. Hypotheses were tested with Pearson Product Moment Correlation Coefficient with the aid of Statistical Package for Social Sciences (SPSS, version 27). Hypothesis one indicated that there is a significant positive relationship between youth education and conflict resolution in Imo State, Nigeria with $r = 0.741$, $n = 171$, and p-value of 0.010 ($p<0.05$). Hypothesis two revealed that there is a positive significant relationship between skill development and creativity in Imo State, Nigeria with $r = 0.822$, $n = 171$, and p-value of 0.035 ($p<0.05$). The study concluded that there is a positive and statistically significant relationship between youth empowerment initiatives and leadership development in Imo State, Nigeria. It therefore recommended that Imo state government needs to improve the quality and accessibility of youth education to promote peace and stability in the state. It also endorsed developing youth skills to enhance the creative capacities of youths in the state.

Keywords: Education, Conflict Resolution, Skill Development, Creativity, Imo State, Nigeria.

Introduction

Leadership development programmes have been widely acknowledged as vital and indispensable strategies for promoting and empowering young people to become active contributors to their communities. These programmes provide young people with the essential skills, knowledge, attitudes, and resources needed to become effective front-runners and change agents, enabling them to make a positive impact in their communities and societies. Consequently, effective leadership is essential for driving development and growth, since leaders play a crucial role in shaping the future of their communities and countries (Kar, Pascual & Chickering, 2023).

Essentially, youth empowerment initiatives have become a crucial aspect of development strategies globally, as nations recognise the importance of investing in their youth population to achieve sustainable development and economic growth. These initiatives have been shown to improve academic achievements, increase employability, enhance career advancement opportunities, and promote overall well-being and health. Moreover, they have been instrumental in fostering a sense of purpose, belonging, and fulfillment among young people, enabling them to become productive and engaged citizens who can make a meaningful difference in the world around them (Ledford & Lucas, 2021).

 It is important to emphasise that education and skill-building are vital factors in youth empowerment initiatives, as they provide young people with the competencies and skills needed to become effective leaders. Education empowers young people to think critically, solve problems, and make informed decisions about their lives. It is critical for addressing the high levels of illiteracy among young people, and for providing them with the knowledge and skills needed to compete in the job market (D'Angelo, Marcus, & Ngabonzima, 2022). On the other hand, skill-building programmes are essential for addressing the high levels of unemployment among young people through creativity, and for providing them with the skills needed to contribute meaningfully to the development of their country (Reischl, et al, 2023).

In Nigeria, the youth population is a significant segment of the country's demographic structure. Specifically, Imo State, located in South-East Nigeria, has implemented a range of youth empowerment initiatives aimed at providing educational opportunities, vocational training, entrepreneurship support, and leadership development programs. The youth empowerment programs in Imo State cover a diverse range of areas, including technical and vocational education, digital literacy, entrepreneurship, and civic engagement (Imo Youth Development Agency, 2023). These programs provide young people with practical experience and exposure to successful role models.

Sadly, Nigerian youths are faced with numerous challenges, including high levels of unemployment, unskillfulness, poverty, high illiteracy rate, and political disenfranchisement, which hinder the ability of young people to contribute meaningfully to the development of the country. The situation is not different in Imo State. There is a lack of leadership development programmes that cater specifically to the needs of young people, leaving a significant gap in the development of the youth population. The state has a high youth unemployment rate, with many young people lacking the skills and resources needed to compete in the job market. This has led to an increase in social vices, such as crime, drug abuse, and violence, among young people in the state. It is against this backdrop that this study sought to ascertain the relationship that exists between youth empowerment initiatives and leadership development in Imo State, Nigeria. The specific objectives are:

1. To determine the relationship that exists between education and conflict resolution in Imo State, Nigeria.

2. To ascertain the association that exists between skill development and creativity in Imo State, Nigeria.

Research Hypotheses

Ho_1: There is no significant relationship that exists between education and conflict resolution in Imo State, Nigeria.

Ho_2: Skill development has no significant association with creativity in Imo State, Nigeria.

Conceptual Review

Youth Empowerment Initiatives

Youth empowerment initiative is defined as "the expansion of assets and capabilities of young people to participate in, negotiate with, influence, control, and hold accountable institutions that affect their lives" (World Bank, 2018). Youth empowerment initiatives aim to address the diverse needs and challenges faced by youth, ranging from education and skill training to entrepreneurship development, digital literacy, and civic engagement. It can be defined as a comprehensive set of programs and interventions designed to equip young people with the necessary skills, resources, and opportunities to actively participate in and contribute to the development of their communities and societies (United Nations, 2020). Similarly, the United Nations Educational, Scientific and Cultural Organisation (UNESCO), defines youth empowerment initiative as "a process where young people are encouraged to take charge of their lives" (UNESCO, 2017). In the context of Imo State, Nigeria, youth empowerment initiatives encompass a wide range of programs that address the specific needs and challenges faced by the state's young population. These initiatives, as highlighted by the Imo State Development Plan (2021-2025), focus on areas such as education, vocational training, entrepreneurship development, digital literacy, and civic engagement, with the overarching goal of cultivating a generation of skilled, entrepreneurial, and socially responsible citizens who can drive sustainable development and positive change.

Skill Development

Skill development is the process of acquiring, enhancing, and continuously improving various competencies, abilities, and proficiencies that enable individuals to perform tasks, solve problems, and contribute more effectively in their personal, academic, and professional spheres (Kang et al., 2021). It encompasses the development of both cognitive skills (such as problem-solving, critical thinking, and decision-making) and non-cognitive skills (such as communication, teamwork, and adaptability) (OECD, 2021).

Skill development is an essential aspect of personal and professional growth, as it helps individuals adapt to the changing job market, enhance their career prospects, and contribute more effectively to their organisations and communities (Noe, 2020). He further adduces that effective skill development involves a combination of formal education, on-the-job training, mentorship, and self-directed learning, and is influenced by various individual, organisational, and environmental factors. Skill development emerged as a critical component of youth empowerment initiatives, identifying the pivotal role that a skilled and knowledgeable workforce plays in driving economic growth and sustainable development. Hence, the United Nations Educational, Scientific and Cultural Organisation (UNESCO) emphasises the importance of integrating skill development initiatives with wider youth empowerment efforts. The report highlights the need to "empower young people through education, skills training, and access to decent work" (UNESCO, 2020). Similarly, a study by the International Labour Organisation (ILO) stresses the "crucial role of skills development in promoting employability, productivity, and inclusive growth" (ILO, 2019). The report calls for a holistic approach to skill development that aligns with labour market demands and provides pathways for both formal and informal employment.

Education

Education is "a fundamental human right and an essential driver for sustainable development and peace" (UNESCO, 2021). This aligns with the assertion that education contributes to the holistic development of individuals by shaping their values, attitudes, and behaviours, and empowering them to become responsible, ethical, and engaged citizens (Noddings, 2015). Similarly, the Organisation for Economic Co-operation and Development [OECD], (2019) adduced that education encompasses a wide range of formal, non-formal, and informal learning experiences that take place throughout an individual's lifetime, from early childhood to adulthood. It can also be seen as the process of facilitating learning, acquiring knowledge, developing skills, and cultivating values, attitudes, and behaviours that enable individuals to reach their full potential and contribute positively to society (UNESCO, 2021). Hence, UNESCO went further to observe that the delivery of education can take place in a variety of settings, including formal institutions such as

schools, universities, vocational training centres, non-formal programs such as community-based learning, workplace training, and informal learning environments such as family, peer groups, media.

Skill Development

Skill development has been a crucial concern in both academic research and organisational practices. The significance of skill development has been well-documented in the extant literature. Its importance cannot be over-emphasised as organisations that invest in the continuous development of their employees' skills are more likely to achieve long-term success and competitiveness (Testa & Sipe, 2021). They further highlight that the ability of individuals and organisations to adapt to the rapidly changing business landscape is highly dependent on the continuous development and enhancement of skills. They also observed that effective skill development programs can lead to increased employee productivity, job satisfaction, and organisational competitiveness. It is a critical component of personal and professional growth, enabling individuals to adapt to the changing demands of the workplace and contribute more meaningfully to their organisations and communities (Noe, 2020). Correspondingly, Shumilova and Cai (2021) maintained that skill development has been linked to improved employee retention, as individuals are more likely to remain with an organisation that invests in their professional growth.

Conflict Resolution

One of the most widely studied conflict resolution approaches is the integrative or collaborative approach, which emphasises finding mutually beneficial solutions through open communication, active listening, and a focus on shared goals and interests (Deutsch, 2014). Effective conflict resolution strategies can improve overall organisational effectiveness. Hence, conflict resolution is a critical skill in both personal and professional settings, as it enables individuals and organisations to effectively manage disagreements, negotiate solutions, and maintain productive relationships (Rahim, 2017). He went further to define conflict management as "the process of limiting the negative aspects of conflict while increasing the positive aspects of conflict." He equally observed that many organisations have implemented training programmes and policies to promote conflict resolution skills among their employees, with the aim of enhancing teamwork, decision-making, and overall organisational effectiveness. This study adduces that the ability to effectively manage conflicts is a critical skill that can have a significant effect on both individual and organisational performance.

Creativity

Over the past two decades, there has been a surge of empirical studies and theoretical developments aimed at better understanding the antecedents, processes, and outcomes of creativity (Amabile, 2018; Kaufman & Sternberg, 2019). While much of the creativity research has focused on individual-level creative performance, there is growing recognition of the importance of understanding creativity at the team and organisational levels. At the individual level, creativity is influenced by a range of cognitive, personality, and motivational factors (Kaufman & Sternberg, 2019). At the contextual level, the social and organisational environment plays a crucial role in shaping creativity. Key factors that influence team creativity, are cognitive diversity, task conflict, and team psychological safety. At the organisational level, some factors like organisational structure, resource allocation, and innovation management practices can either facilitate or hinder creativity and innovation (Amabile & Pratt, 2016). Overall, creativity is a multidimensional construct that encompasses the production of ideas, products, or solutions that are both novel and useful within a given context (Runco & Jaeger, 2021).

Theoretical Framework

The paper is anchored on Positive Youth Development (PYD) theory by Lerner and associates (2005). Positive Youth Development is a strengths-based approach that has become increasingly influential in the study of youth development and empowerment initiatives. It takes a holistic view of youth, focusing on their strengths, competencies, and developmental assets, rather than just their deficits or problems. It also recognises the significant role that individual, family, community, and societal factors play in shaping youth development. PYD advocates for active youth participation, engagement, and leadership in programs and decision-making processes.

The theory is relevant because it aligns well with the goals of youth empowerment and leadership development initiatives. Hence, it emphasises the active engagement and leadership of young people which aims to foster the overall growth and thriving of young people. It also focuses on building their strengths, competencies, and developmental assets.

Empirical Studies

Geza, Ngidi, Slotow and Mabhaudhi (2022) examined the dynamics of youth employment and empowerment in agriculture and rural development in South Africa: A scoping review. The specific objectives of this study was to determine youth participation and empowerment in the agricultural sector in SA, as well as assess government policies, strategies, and programmes related to youth participation and empowerment in agriculture in SA to ensure equality and inclusivity of youth in the sector. The study conducted a scoping review using the PRISMA-P guidelines to identify the challenges youth face in accessing sustainable employment in the agriculture sector for 1994–2021. The findings showed that youth are still facing significant challenges in the demand and supply side of the labour market and a lack of inclusivity in policy formulation and implementation, limiting their involvement in agriculture and rural development initiatives.

Hamann, Holz and Reese (2021) determined coaching for a sustainability transition: Empowering student-led sustainability initiatives by developing skills, group identification, and efficacy beliefs in Germany. This study sought to investigate the factors that influence the effectiveness of peer-to-peer coaching programs in empowering student-led sustainability initiatives. The study tested such factors in the context of a peer-to-peer coaching program for sustainability volunteers, embedded in a structured-educational context. 317 participants completed the pre-questionnaire, 165 completed both the

pre-and post-questionnaire. The analyses revealed that efficacy beliefs on the individual level were higher when the university had a green office and when the student initiative was at a small university.

Lüdeke, Linderkamp, Baumann and Lembke (2020) assessed empirical analysis of creativity in children and adolescents with internalising and externalising problem behaviour in Germany. The objective of this study was to assess whether problem behavior is relevant to explain variance in creativity test achievements while controlling for socioeconomic status differences. The study addressed the question of whether problem behaviour is relevant to explain variance in creativity test achievements while controlling for socioeconomic status differences. The sample comprised 234 children and adolescents from Germany. Hierarchic regression analyses were used to analyse the impact of problem behaviour on creativity. The study found that internalising problems were negatively associated with creativity as well a moderate positive correlation between dissocial problem behaviour and creativity.

Dunne and Gazdar (2018) investigated the relationship between education quality and conflict in Pakistan. The aim of this study was to examine the impact of educational factors (such as dropout rates, resource availability, and teacher training) on the prevalence and persistence of violent conflicts. The study employed a cross-sectional, observational research design to examine the relationship between variables. The study utilised a regression model to identify the strength and direction of the association between the variables. The findings indicated that poor quality of education, characterised by high dropout rates, limited resources, and inadequate teacher training, contributed to the perpetuation of violent conflicts in the region.

Beghetto and Kaufman (2014) explored the role of skill development in promoting creativity among students. The objective was to examine the relationship between students' perceived creative competence and their creative self-efficacy beliefs. The study used a survey methodology. The researchers collected data from 290 students in grades 3-8 in the United States. Students completed self-report measures assessing their perceived creative competence, creative self-efficacy beliefs, and creative behaviors in the classroom. They found that the integration of domain-specific and generalised skills into educational curricula can help students develop the necessary foundations to engage in creative thinking and problem-solving.

From the reviewed studies, the methodologies, population, geographical location and time are all different from the present study. Therefore, this study sought to bridge these gaps.

Methodology

The study adopted survey research design. The population of this study comprised of 100 youths from Orlu zone, 100 youths from Okigwe zone, and 100 youths from Owerri zone which are the three (3) senatorial zones in Imo State, Nigeria, making a total population of 300. Sample size of 171 was determined with Taro Yamane's method. Browley's proportional allocation method was used to determine the questionnaire distribution per zone, hence Orlu (57), Okigwe (57) and Owerri (57) copies of structured questionnaire. Both face and content validity were employed while reliability was tested with Cronbach Alpha Coefficient with the aid of Statistical Package for Social Science (SPSS version 27). The output value of the 12 number of items was 0.827 which shows that the instrument is reliable. Hypotheses were tested with the Pearson Product Moment Correlation Coefficient at a 5% level of significance.

Decision Rule: Reject the null hypothesis and accept the alternate if P-value < 0.05; if otherwise, accept the null Hypothesis.

Hypotheses Testing

Hypothesis One

Table 1: Ho: There is no significant relationship between education and conflict resolution in Imo State, Nigeria.

Ha: There is a significant relationship between education and conflict resolution in Imo State, Nigeria.

Table 1:   Correlations

		Education	Conflict Resolution
Education	Pearson correlation	1	.741**
	Sig. (2-tailed)		.010
	N	171	171
Conflict Resolution	Pearson correlation	.741**	1
	Sig. (2-tailed)	.010	
	N	171	171

Source: SPSS version 27 Outputs.

Table 1 shows that there is a significant positive relationship between education and conflict resolution in Imo State, Nigeria with r = 0.741, n = 171, and p-value of 0.010 (p<0.05). Therefore, the study accepted the alternate hypothesis and concluded that there is a significant positive relationship between education and conflict resolution in Imo State, Nigeria.

Hypothesis Two

Table 2: Ho: There is no significant relationship between skill development and creativity in Imo State, Nigeria.

Ha: There is a significant relationship between skill development and creativity in Imo State, Nigeria.

Table 2:   Correlations

		Skill Development	Creativity
Skill Development	Pearson correlation	1	.822**
	Sig. (2-tailed)		.035
	N	171	171
Creativity	Pearson correlation	.822**	1
	Sig. (2-tailed)	.035	
	N	171	171

Source: SPSS version 27 Outputs.

Table 2 shows that there is a positive significant relationship between skill development and creativity in Imo State, Nigeria with r = 0.822, n = 171 and p value of 0.035 (p<0.05). Therefore, the study accepted the alternate hypothesis and concluded that there is a positive significant relationship between skill development and creativity in Imo State, Nigeria.

Discussion of Finding

Findings from the test of the first hypothesis indicated that enhancing youth education can be a viable approach to achieving more sustainable peace and stability in Imo State, Nigeria. This finding aligns with the result of Dunne and Gazdar (2018) that education has a significant positive effect on the sustainability of a nation. Thus, improving the quality and accessibility of education in Imo State could significantly enhance the conflict resolution capacities of its youth population, leading to various social, economic, and cultural benefits.

The study equally found that there is a significant positive relationship between skill development and creativity in Imo State, Nigeria. This implies that enhancing youth individuals' skills can be a viable approach to achieving more creative young minds and economic stability in Imo State, Nigeria. This finding corroborates with the result of Beghetto and Kaufman (2014); Hamann, Holz, and Reese (2021) that skill development has a significant positive effect on creativity for the sustainability of a nation.

Conclusion

The study concludes that leadership development is a critical aspect of youth empowerment initiatives. As the state continues to invest in education, youths will be equipped with practical competencies for conflict resolution and a positive mindset to navigate socio-political challenges Again, investing in the skill development of youths in Imo state will translate to creativity, enabling young people to unleash their innovative potential to transform Imo State into a thriving, resilient, and prosperous region.

Recommendations

The study recommends that:

1. The Imo state government needs to improve the quality and accessibility of education so as to maintain sustainable conflict resolution through youth empowerment in promoting peace and stability in the state.

2. Imo state government needs to build skill development centers which can enhance the creative capacities of its population, leading to various social, economic, and cultural benefits.

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