**Global Partnership Against Child Exploitation (GPACE): Youth Participation and Democratic Education**

Wiki Contributor History

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A youth-led project which allowed youth to become more democratically involved in the Community Development Committees. The project changed the way Community Development Committee decision are made by including youth representatives in the process.

**Problems and Purpose**

The GPACE sought to address inequitable systems of representation within the community, located in Lilongwe, Malawi, Southern Africa. More importantly, it sought to address the lack of decision-making structures for the youth to shape their own learning. By giving the youth space to re-imagine what their expertise, experience could be if they were to co-integrate it, this experience sought to empower students to participate in the governance of their own world.

This project was a youth empowerment approach could shape more democratic decision-making structures within the community, a community decision-making body. The goal was to provide the opportunity, resources, and structure for a group of youth to explore and experience democratic processes for themselves without limitation

**Background History and Context**

before 2018, there existed neither a mechanism through which student ideas, opinions, or concerns could be heard by the community leaders reviewed transparently, nor an obligation for trustees to consult youth in decisions regarding their affairs, or community policy. The lines of accountability between youth and leaders and between youth and trustees had never been drawn explicitly. As a result, it was unclear how the youth could influence or implement change, and how they could be heard by those in decision-making positions. This led to a sense of disempowerment among the youth—a problem the GPACEaimed to solve using a youth-led, participatory process.

Choosing a youth that would address the question of civic engagement and student participation within this context of ethnic diversity was essential.

**Organizing, Supporting, and Funding Entities**

 Resources were available thanks to Tilitonse Fund for providing funds for the implementation of a two year project to address issues of youth participation in Community development structures.

**Participant Recruitment and Selection**

The GPACEcomprised of 10 youth organizations (two young men, and eight young women representatives). Youth were then invited to fill out an application form, aimed at gauging their expectations, passions, and level of dedication to see the course through until the end.

Responses to the application could be provided in writing, as illustrations, or verbally. Selection criteria included students’ genuine concern for, and willingness to explore difficult and contentious systemic issues, and their desire to design the content and structure of the course. The youth were selected based on their diverse perspectives.

**Methods and Tools Used**

As a paradigm that seeks to identify and build on the strengths and opportunities of a system or community, implementation of a [democratic](https://participedia.net/en/methods/democratic-education)or ['participatory' educational](https://participedia.net/en/methods/participatory-education) model throughout the Democracy Project. Within this approach, methods such as participatory project management (PPM), motivational interviewing, [Deep Democracy](https://participedia.net/en/methods/lewis-method-deep-democracy), and storytelling were used.

*Participatory Project Management (PPM)***:** youth were taught an experiential, place-based curriculum that focused on celebrating their lived experience as pillars of knowledge, or assets. PPM, in other words, was used to create a space for participants to inform the direction of their learning and the overall curriculum within the Democracy Project.

*Motivational Interviewing***:** As a goal-oriented approach that seeks to inspire the interviewee to make changes in behaviours/actions, this approach was used to focus the youth to identify goals and make self-directed decisions to achieve them.

The qualitative data used for this case was gathered over a 9-month period, using grounded theory to unearth key patterns. While not a participatory method, this research method seeks to identify emerging patterns in data and was used to capture data generated through participatory actions. The facilitator interpreted the qualitative data from storytelling, interviews, and participant observation into theory and relied on this to explain key findings. A mid-point survey was administered to measure learning indicators set collaboratively at the beginning of the course by both the students themselves (i.e., what skills they wanted to learn) and the facilitator’s own participatory research goals. All 10 youth responded to this written survey. To capture additional perspectives and outcomes after the project.

**What Went On: Process, Interaction, and Participation**

*Deliberations and decisions within the group*

Workshops were held twice a week during the weekends. Initial course content mainly focused on citizenship and democratic theory and practice. However, the youth themselves collectively decided on how they wanted to learn. They experimented with peer-to-peer learning, working in pairs to teach the group on a subject of their choosing, and voted on topics and themes they wished to explore more deeply. All deliberations were done in a dialogue circle, challenging participants to listen deeply to one another.

In the third day, the youth grappled with their first collective decision-making process around how to structure roles and responsibilities within the group in an effort to establish lines of accountability. Two of the students were frustrated with the lack of accountability from other members, which gave way to a week-long deliberation to determine the group’s “legislation” on accountability. The students co-created their own governance rules, prompted by the facilitator with questions to frame this group mechanism.

From this point forward, all decisions were made using consensus or majority rule. When deliberating on their action project for the year. The students made the decision using dot-mocracy—an experiential democratic activity based on the principles of majority vote.

**Influence, Outcomes, and Effects**

Though the measurable outcomes of the GPACEwere few at the systemic level, the influence and lasting effect of the students’ work within the youth and community was significant. The GPACEmanaged to change the outlook of youth towards the community structures. Finally, at an individual level, the GPACEenabled for youth participants to deepen their self-awareness and empathy, as well as construct a critical analysis of the world around them.

**Analysis and Lessons Learned**

In analyzing the data from both mid-point and post-project surveys, three key lessons emerged along with insights into strengths and limitations of the approaches taken.

*Increased agency, cooperation, and accountability in all youth*

First, the dialectic and participatory approach resulted in all respondents reporting increased agency and cooperative skills in the post survey. Further, all reported that they perceived themselves to play an important role in the process, indicating they understood themselves as agents of change. All respondents also reported an increase in their ability to cooperate from the mid-point survey onwards. In fact, when asked by the facilitator what their biggest learning was, every respondent cited “cooperation.” “Accountability” was the second most cited learning, with 80% of respondents reporting that “democracy is about accountability and making sure everyone’s voice is heard, often before your own.”

*Deepened sense of empathy among youth*

The second lesson came from the emphasis on team building and interpersonal respect. At the beginning of the process, the facilitator led a process to reach community agreements, which challenged students to identify what each needed to participate fully. From that point on, participants were bound to uphold these agreements. All youth reported an increase in empathy after the course concluded. This deepening of empathy enabled each participant to take this new lens into collaborations with peers and friends outside the GPACE.

*Importance of inclusive decision-making processes*

Ninety percent (90%) of respondents to the survey reported that they now “listen to all sides before making a decision” and that they “feel strongly that it is important to listen to all sides even when making individual decisions” because they saw the value in deep listening when working within participatory processes.

*Participatory pedagogy as a catalyst for action*

This experience also illustrates that education—and, in particular, participatory pedagogies—not only builds learners’ knowledge and skills, but also contributes to the attitudinal changes often required for individuals and groups to take action. In other words, the successes the group had in changing district-wide policy was closely linked to the methodology used for learning about citizenship, democracy, and inclusive representation in the GPACE learning space. Through this approach, bonds were strengthened between youth, a crucial relationship was initiated with the community committee and trust was built over time such that youth’ collective demands were seen as legitimate and ultimately were acted upon.

*Summary of outcomes*

Overall, outcomes from the GPACE highlight the importance of building the trust needed to cultivate strong mutual accountability amongst youth. Relational and experiential pedagogy was effective in empowering youth to use their own lived experience to understand concepts, to develop the soft social skills required to sustain participatory processes, and to generate action that led to the design and establishment of a more inclusive process for youth representation. Considering the project’s initial question—*How can we empower youth to be more civically engaged in the socity?*—the participatory process used was successful in empowering youth with a heightened sense of personal agency. All students reported that they see the value in, and would want to join a collaborative civic movement. Lastly, as a complement to the changes in policy and district-level governance structures, the youth themselves also developed the life-long skills to practice principles of cooperation, empathy, and accountability.

*Thanks very much for the resources without you it is impossible for us to meet with the needs of our beneficiaries.*