

EMOTIONAL INTELLIGENCE: THE SECRET TO EFFECTIVE YOUTH MANAGEMENT IN NIGERIA

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INTRODUCTION

Emotional intelligence (EI) has emerged as one of the most critical competencies for effective leadership and youth engagement in the 21st century. In Nigeria, where the youth population forms more than half of the national demographic structure, understanding and managing young people require more than authority or policy direction. It demands emotional sensitivity, empathy, social awareness, and interpersonal competence (Nwauzoije et al., 2024). Emotional Intelligence is the ability to perceive, understand, manage and use emotions adaptively, emerged over the last three decades as a central construct for explaining individual and group outcomes that traditional Intelligent Quotient (IQ) measures fail to capture. According to Adebusuyi and Ayodele (2018), Daniel Goleman popularized the idea that EI components such as self-awareness, self-regulation, motivation, empathy and social skills, strongly predict leadership effectiveness, stress resilience, and social functioning across contexts. Youth management through an EI lens shifts the emphasis from solely enforcing rules or delivering instruction to intentionally developing young people's emotional competencies so they can regulate impulses, navigate relationships, and make constructive decisions in complex social environments (Ezurike, 2024).

The demography of Nigeria places youths at the centre of socio-economic development, thereby making effective youth management as policy priority and practical necessity. This is at the instance of high rates of youth unemployment, rising incidents of school and community unrest and localized episodes of recruitment into violent groups which have heightened interest in interventions

that do more than punish (Goleman, 1995). This brings about interventions that build capacities for self-control, empathy and prosocial engagement. Emotionally intelligent approaches to youth management, in schools, community programmes, or entrepreneurship training is expected to reduce counter-productive behaviours and increase youth participation in leadership. The youth reality in Nigeria is complex ranging from unemployment, academic pressure, insecurity, migration aspirations, drug abuse, to mental health challenges continue to shape the daily experience of the youths.

Youth management in Nigeria has increasingly shifted from traditional control-based approaches to development-oriented strategies that recognize the emotional and psychological needs of young people where more than 60% of Nigeria's population is under the age of 30 and the country's socio-economic stability and future leadership capacity depend heavily on how effectively its youth are guided, empowered, and integrated into decision-making processes (Ezurike, 2024). Emotional Intelligence (EI) is the ability to understand and regulate emotions, empathize with others, and manage interpersonal relationships constructively (Nwauzoije et al., 2024). EI-driven youth management offers a practical pathway for building trust, enhancing communication and encouraging constructive civic participation.

In response to the needs of the youth population, Nigeria reinforces practical areas of EI strengthened through structured policies, training and self-management programmes as well linking EI to youth empowerment and entrepreneurship (Ezurike, 2024). Nigeria has developed policies that position youth at the forefront of national development. For instance, the National Youth Policy (2019) emphasizes life-skills education, leadership development and psychosocial well-being of the youths. The policy advocates mentoring structures, youth councils, and platforms that allow young people to contribute meaningfully to governance and community decision-making. Another example is the Not-Too-Young-To-Run Act (2018), which significantly reduced the age requirements for elective offices (Nwauzoije et al., 2024). Although not explicitly framed as an EI policy, the Act indirectly promotes EI-driven leadership by allowing emotionally competent, innovative, and socially aware young leaders to contest for political positions previously closed to them. The policies highlight a uniquely valuable policy lever in Nigeria's context to improve resilience, decision-making under pressure and social competence among the youths.

Additionally, many states and ministries have introduced programmes such as the Youth Digital Skills Empowerment Program (NDPC), N-Power, YouWin Connect, and state-level youth parliaments. The mentioned programmes, when combined with EI-focused coaching, such as training in communication, empathy-based community engagement and adaptive leadership, the platforms will nurture emotionally stable youth leaders capable of managing diversity,

mediating conflicts, and inspiring collective action (Nwauzoije et al., 2024). Civil society organisations have also developed EI-centered leadership boot camps that equip young people with the emotional skills needed to participate effectively in governance, policy dialogue, and community advocacy. Together, these developments demonstrate that emotional intelligence is not merely a personal attribute but a strategic tool for national development and youth leadership integration. Strengthening EI within formal education, youth empowerment schemes, and political inclusion policies will ensure that young Nigerians are not only managed effectively but also prepared to take on prominent leadership roles in driving the country's future.

Concept of Youth

The concept of "youth" is a universal, yet elusive thread in the fabric of human society, representing far more than a mere biological interim between childhood and adulthood. Globally, youth is understood as a dynamic and formative life stage, a period of profound physical, psychological, and social transition (Wu et al., 2022). It is a crucible wherein identity is forged, worldviews are shaped, and the skills necessary for navigating adult life are acquired. International bodies like the United Nations statistically define this group as individuals aged 15 to 24, a useful but often restrictive bracket that fails to capture the cultural nuances of this transition (Yan, 2022). According to Wu et al., (2022), this stage is characterized by a dualistic nature: it is a peak of vitality, creativity, and potential for innovation, yet it is also a time of significant vulnerability, where individuals are susceptible to exploitation, disillusionment, and exclusion from meaningful societal participation.

In the Nigerian context, this universal concept takes on a distinct and intensified character. Officially, the National Youth Policy defines youth as those between the ages of 18 and 35, a significantly broader span than the UN's definition (Uduji et al., 2020). This extended range is not arbitrary; it is a pragmatic acknowledgment of a protracted journey to adulthood. Also, the transition is often elongated by socio-economic realities into what social scientists term "waithood" suggesting a prolonged state of suspension where traditional milestones of adulthood, such as secure employment, financial independence, marriage, and home ownership, remain persistently out of reach (Ibrahim & Bala, 2018). Consequently, the Nigerian youth is a figure of immense contradiction. They are part of a demographic powerhouse, with over 70% of the population under 30, representing an unparalleled potential for national transformation, a "dividend" that economists fervently cite (Nwankwo & Eze, 2021). Nonetheless, this very potential, when met with systemic neglect and limited opportunity, is perceived as a ticking time bomb (Uduji et al., 2020).

Youth Management

Youth management refers to the systematic, often institutional, approach to overseeing, directing, and controlling the energies and activities of the young

population (Strong & Kelly, 2022). Its conceptual foundation is rooted in a perspective that views youth as a social group requiring guidance, regulation, and at times, containment. Globally, youth management manifests through state apparatuses such as educational systems that channel youth into predetermined academic and vocational paths, legal frameworks that define the age of consent and criminal responsibility and social services designed to intervene in cases of delinquency or at-risk behaviour (Eme & Onyishi, 2019). In stable societies, youth management is integrated with development goals, but it often carries an implicit focus on compliance and the integration of youth into the existing societal structure rather than transforming that structure to meet their needs (Akomolafe & Adegoriola, 2020).

In Nigeria, youth management has historically been skewed towards the control and containment dimension, often as a direct response to the scale of the youth population. This paradigm is deeply entrenched in the country's political history, where successive regimes, both military and civilian, have viewed the organized energy of young people with apprehension (Akomolafe & Adegoriola, 2020). State-led initiatives have frequently been reactive, emerging prominently in the aftermath of social unrest or as part of political patronage systems. Programmes are often launched with great fanfare but are plagued by a lack of sustainability, poor funding, and politicization, where opportunities are distributed as favours rather than on merit. The starkest manifestation of this management-centric approach is the heavy-handed use of security forces to quell youth-led protests, framing legitimate dissent as a threat to public order (Nwankwo & Eze, 2021). This creates a fundamental tension: the state manages the youth as a problem to be solved, while the youth perceive the state as an obstacle to their aspirations. This adversarial relationship undermines trust and hampers any genuine progress, revealing the critical limitations of a framework based primarily on management rather than empowerment.

Youth Development

Youth development represents a positive, asset-based, and aspirational framework with its core conceptual focus premised on the fact that youth are not problems to be managed but partners and resources to be invested in (Juhdi et al., 2015). Global best practices in youth development focus on a holistic approach that seeks to equip young individuals with the assets and competencies necessary for a successful and engaged life (Yan, 2022). Levchenko and Koliada (2022) contended that youth development goes beyond formal education to encompass the six C's: Competence, Confidence, Connection, Character, Caring and Contribution. This paradigm is enacted through inclusive quality education, accessible healthcare (including sexual and reproductive health), civic engagement opportunities, leadership training, and platforms for meaningful participation in decision-making at all levels. International frameworks, such as the World Programme of Action for Youth, advocate for this developmental

approach, emphasizing that investing in youth is the most effective strategy for achieving sustainable development, peace, and economic resilience (Nwankwo & Eze, 2021).

Nigeria urgently needs to shift from merely managing youth to genuinely developing them.

Young people's demands for quality education, healthcare, and employment form the basis of national stability. True development requires modernized education aligned with 21st-century skills. Massive investment in TVET and stronger school-to-work transitions are essential. Akomolafe and Adegioriola (2020) affirmed that entrepreneurship must be supported through funding, mentorship, and infrastructure. Youth must be given meaningful roles in governance, not symbolic inclusion. Despite systemic challenges, the creativity and resilience of Nigerian youth, evident in tech., entertainment, and social enterprise, remain the nation's strongest asset.

Emotional Intelligence in Youth Development

Conceptually, emotional intelligence (EI) transcends the narrow confines of academic intellect, representing a more holistic form of intelligence crucial for human functioning. EI is the capacity to perceive, process, regulate, and utilize emotional information effectively, both within oneself and in others (Goleman, 1995). This multifaceted construct, popularized by psychologists like Peter Salovey and John Mayer and later by Daniel Goleman, is often organized around four core domains: self-awareness (recognizing one's own emotions), self-management (regulating those emotions adaptively), social awareness (empathizing with others' emotional states) and relationship management (inspiring, influencing, and connecting with others).

The deployment of emotional intelligence in youth development is not merely an add-on but a fundamental pillar for fostering resilient, empathetic, and socially competent adults. Adolescence and young adulthood are characterized by a neurological social storm and stress, where emotional volatility is high and the prefrontal cortex is still maturing (Schutte et al., 2011). Durlak et al. (2011) confirmed that the systematic integration of EI into development programs, equips young people with the tools to master this internal turbulence. In practice, this deployment involves structured interventions that teach skills such as emotional literacy by labeling feelings with precision; impulse control, pausing before reacting in anger or distress and empathetic perspective-taking. This makes the youth understand the world from another's viewpoint. For a young person, these skills translate directly into improved academic performance through better focus and stress management, healthier peer relationships by reducing conflict and building trust, and a fortified sense of self-worth rooted in genuine competence. In the Nigerian context, where youth face immense pressures from economic uncertainty and social friction, EI becomes a critical buffer, a personal

resource that can mitigate against anxiety, aggression, and despair, channeling potent youthful energy into constructive, rather than destructive, ends. It is, therefore, an indispensable investment creating not just a skilled workforce, but also, a harmonious and psychologically resilient society.

Gender and Emotional Intelligence: The Nigeria Perspective

In Nigeria, the conceptual discourse on gender and emotional intelligence (EI) is deeply interwoven with the nation's complex socio-cultural tapestry, where traditional norms coexist with modern urban realities. (Emotional intelligence). Nigerian women are frequently socialized from childhood to be nurturing, empathetic and relationally attuned with core competencies that align directly with the social awareness and relationship management domains of EI (Adeboye & Adebayo, 2020). This proficiency is often framed as a natural female asset, essential for maintaining ancestral and communal harmony. Conversely, Nigerian masculinity is traditionally constructed around ideals of stoicism, authority, and economic provision, which can suppress the development of emotional self-awareness and expression in men, deeming them signs of vulnerability incompatible with the role of a patriarch (Nwoye, 2015).

However, the apparent female aptitude for EI constitutes a significant social paradox within the Nigerian context. While women's emotional labour is indispensable in managing household dynamics, soothing social tensions and increasingly serving as primary emotional anchors in challenging economic times, it is often exploited and institutionally undervalued (Adeboye & Adebayo, 2020). In the corporate sphere, while women may be praised for their softer interpersonal skills, this rarely translates equitably into leadership opportunities, which are still often reserved for men whose more authoritative, less emotionally demonstrative style is misinterpreted as stronger strategic leadership (Nwoye, 2015). This creates a glass ceiling upheld by gender interpretations of EI itself. The core gender issue in Nigeria, therefore, extends beyond mere score differences on an EI test. It is about the functional application and reward of emotional skills within a patriarchal framework. The challenge for youth development and national progress is to de-couple EI from gendered stereotypes, promoting it as a critical national competency for all. Generally, gender norms influence how emotional intelligence is expressed in Nigeria. Girls are often encouraged to be more expressive and nurturing, while boys are conditioned to suppress their emotions. These gendered expectations can affect leadership styles, vulnerability levels and communication patterns. Integrating EI into youth programmes can help dismantle harmful stereotypes and promote healthier emotional expression across genders.

Emotional Intelligence and Youth Management in Nigeria

Nigeria is a nation with one of the largest youth populations in the world, characterized by significant diversity in culture, education, socio-economic background, and aspirations. In such a dynamic environment, effective youth management requires more than administrative oversight. It demands the capacity

to understand, relate with and inspire young people through emotional intelligence to connect with young people at cognitive, emotional and social levels through the deployment of the following EI components (Nwauzoije et al., 2024).

Empathy: A key component of EI in youth management is empathy which represents the ability of leaders and mentors to genuinely understand young people's emotions and perspectives. In Nigeria, where generational communication gaps are often wide, empathetic engagement helps bridge misunderstanding and enables adults to design support systems that align with youth needs. Whether in schools, community programs, or employment settings, empathetic management encourages openness, responsible behavior, and stronger interpersonal relationships.

Self-awareness and self-regulation: Self-awareness and self-regulation are equally essential for those responsible for managing youth in Nigeria. Without emotional self-management, leaders may unintentionally communicate frustration or hostility, reinforcing negative youth experiences with authority. EI empowers youth managers to model emotional stability, patience and constructive communication behaviour that young people naturally observe and adopt.

Motivation: EI enhances motivation, both for leaders and the youth they guide. Managing Nigerian youths requires the ability to inspire hope, resilience, and long-term vision, particularly in a society where opportunities can seem scarce. Emotionally intelligent leaders use encouragement, recognition, and purpose-driven communication to keep young people engaged in positive pursuits such as education, innovation, entrepreneurship, and community development.

Social skills: Another pillar of EI-youth management is through social skill which enables effective collaboration, negotiation and conflict resolution among the youths. These skills are indispensable for youth empowerment programmes, educational reforms, and community initiatives across Nigeria. When youth managers demonstrate strong social skills, they foster environments where young people feel valued, understood and capable of contributing meaningfully.

Challenges and Policy Considerations of EI in Youth Management

Despite the importance of EI in managing the Nigerian youths, challenges still abound which include and not limited to cultural resistance and weak institutional policy framework for youth management. The challenges and the policy considerations are highlighted as follows.

- i. **Limited EI Competence Among Youth Managers:** Many educators, administrators and youth leaders lack adequate training in emotional intelligence, reducing their ability to engage youths effectively. The policy consideration in this instance is to introduce mandatory EI training programs for teachers, youth workers, and public officials. Incorporate EI modules into teacher education colleges, NYSC orientation programs, and leadership development initiatives.
- ii. **Inadequate Counselling and Support Structures:** Schools, communities and youth organizations often lack functional counselling units and guidance services, weakening emotional support for young people. Government and the civil society organizations should establish well-funded counselling and psychosocial support centers in all educational institutions and youth development agencies. Recruit and train qualified counsellors and set national standards for youth psychological services.
- iii. **Socio-Economic and Environmental Stressors:** Unemployment, insecurity and family instability create emotional stress for youths, making EI-based interventions harder to implement. Policy should seek to develop integrated youth welfare policies addressing economic empowerment, vocational training, and mental health. Implement social protection policies that reduce stressors undermining emotional stability.
- iv. **Weak Institutional Coordination for Youth Development:** Fragmented roles among ministries, schools, NGOs and community institutions lead to inconsistent youth engagement practices. Government should create a coordinated national framework for youth emotional development under the Federal Ministry of Youth and Sports. Align this framework with education, health, and social development policies to create a unified EI-based youth management strategy.
- v. **Cultural and Generational Barriers:** Hierarchical cultural norms, stigma around expressing emotions and generational conflicts make it difficult for youths and adults to communicate openly. To address this, there should be a policy in place to promote cultural reforms that encourage healthy emotional expression and youth participation. Implement public campaigns, school programs, and community dialogues that normalize emotional awareness and bridge generational gaps.

Conclusion

Emotional Intelligence (EI) offers a transformative approach to youth management in Nigeria by shifting from control-focused methods to strategies that address youths' emotional and social needs. With many young Nigerians facing unemployment, insecurity, and social pressures, EI helps build resilience,

improve communication, and strengthen leadership skills through empathy, self-awareness, and social competence. Although policies like the National Youth Policy and empowerment programmes show progress, challenges such as weak institutional coordination, limited EI training, poor counselling systems and restrictive cultural norms hinder full implementation.

Recommendations

Consequent upon the findings of the study, the following recommendations which are anticipated to foster emotionally resilient, responsible and innovative youths capable of advancing national development, have been suggested.

1. The government and educational institutions should embed structured Emotional Intelligence training into school curricula, vocational centers, and NYSC programs. This includes teaching self-awareness, empathy, conflict resolution, and emotional regulation to help young people navigate unemployment, insecurity, and peer pressures more effectively.
2. Policymakers should enhance coordination among youth-focused agencies by improving counselling units, training youth workers in EI-based approaches, and ensuring better implementation of the National Youth Policy. Strengthening these systems will foster a more supportive environment that promotes emotional resilience and social competence.
3. Community leaders, NGOs and religious institutions should initiate EI-focused campaigns, mentorship programmes, and awareness activities to challenge restrictive cultural norms. Encouraging open communication, emotional expression, and supportive relationships within communities will help youths develop leadership skills and contribute meaningfully to national development.

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