

Unpacking tokenism in the governance of Ghanaian public basic schools

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ABSTRACT

The School Management Committee (SMC) is central to Ghana's decentralised basic education governance framework and is intended to enhance accountability, transparency, and community participation at the school level. However, evidence suggests that their practical influence on financial oversight and decision-making remains uneven. Guided by participatory decision-making theory, this qualitative case study examines how SMC promotes financial transparency and participates in school-level decision-making in selected public basic schools in the Akuapem North Municipality of Ghana. Data were generated through semi-structured interviews with 28 participants comprising headteachers, teachers, and SMC members, complemented by document analysis of school financial records and SMC meeting minutes. Thematic analysis revealed that while SMCs are active in community mobilisation, minor infrastructure decisions, and conflict mediation, their role in financial transparency and strategic decision-making is largely procedural. Financial accountability is a closely regulated connection between headteachers and SMC executives; teachers, parents, and the public are not provided with much information about it. Decision-making processes were found to be predominantly ratification-driven, with SMC approving rather than shaping budgets and school improvement plans. These findings show a substantial discrepancy between governance practices and policy aspirations, demonstrating participation without real authority. The study concludes that the effectiveness of SMC depends not on their formal existence but on the depth, structure, and resourcing of participation. Strengthening school governance requires institutional redesign to shift from procedural to substantive community empowerment. It is recommended that the Ministry of Education and the Ghana Education Service improve participatory school governance through transparent financial reporting, capacity building for school management committees, and explicit job definitions in budgeting and monitoring. Also, regional, district, and educational actors should promote accountability through collaborative planning, developmental monitoring, and inclusive financial oversight that educates the broader community.

Keywords: Accountability, Decentralisation, Financial Transparency, Ghana, Participatory Governance, School Management Committees

I. INTRODUCTION

Decentralisation has emerged globally as a dominant reform strategy in education governance, premised on the assumption that devolving authority to local actors enhances accountability, responsiveness, and efficiency in service delivery (United Nations Environmental, Scientific and Cultural Organization [UNESCO], 2009; World Bank, 2010). Within this framework, community participation is positioned not merely as a supportive mechanism but as a core governance principle through which schools become answerable to the publics they serve (Bruns et al., 2011). In many low- and middle-income contexts, decentralised education reforms have been operationalised through school-based management structures that institutionalise local participation in planning, monitoring, and financial oversight.

In Ghana, the decentralisation of public basic education has been formalised through policies such as FCUBE and the Pre-Tertiary Education Act (2020), which mandate the establishment of School Management Committees (SMC) in all public basic schools (Republic of Ghana, 2020). SMC is envisaged as a participatory governance body responsible for strengthening transparency, accountability, and community ownership of schools by involving parents, traditional authorities, and community representatives in school administration (Ghana Education Service, 2019; Akyeampong, 2009). Their prescribed roles include financial oversight, participation in decision-making, infrastructure development, and acting as a bridge between schools and their communities.

However, international and Ghanaian scholarship increasingly cautions that decentralisation does not automatically translate into democratic or accountable school governance. Studies across diverse contexts show that while formal participatory structures exist, real decision-making power often remains concentrated in school leadership or district authorities, resulting in procedural rather than substantive participation (Arnstein, 1969; Keddie, 2015; Essuman & Akyeampong, 2011). In Ghana specifically, empirical evidence suggests that SMC is more active in

community mobilisation and infrastructure support than in financial transparency, budgeting, or strategic planning (Abreh, 2017; Andoh-Robertson et al., 2020; Agbi et al., 2024). While prior studies have noted SMC limitations, this study provides a fine-grained, evidence-based analysis of how financial transparency and decision-making power are negotiated and constrained in daily practice.

Against this backdrop, questions persist about whether SMC functions as a genuine agent of participatory governance or as a symbolic structure that legitimises decisions made elsewhere. Drawing on Participatory Decision-Making Theory, this study examines how SMC operates in practice, focusing specifically on their role in promoting financial transparency and their involvement in school-level decision-making in a public basic school in Ghana.

1.1 Statement of the Problem

Accountability and transparency are widely recognised as foundational to effective school governance, equitable resource use, and improved educational outcomes. In decentralised education systems, these principles are expected to be realised through participatory governance structures that enable communities to monitor, influence, and hold schools accountable for decisions and resource utilisation (UNESCO, 2009; Bruns et al., 2011). In Ghana, the SMC was established precisely to serve this function by embedding community participation within school-level governance.

Despite their universal presence in public basic schools, evidence suggests that SMC's contributions to accountability and transparency remain uneven and often limited. Empirical studies report persistent challenges, including limited technical capacity, unclear mandates, restricted access to financial information, and weak enforcement of accountability mechanisms (Abreh, 2017; Aryeh-Adjei, 2021; Kwaah & Nishimuko, 2023). Rather than functioning as co-governors, SMC is frequently confined to implementation roles such as fundraising, infrastructure maintenance, and community mobilisation, with minimal influence over budgeting, strategic planning, or pedagogical decisions (Agbi et al., 2024).

This disjunction between policy intent and practice raises a critical governance concern: participatory structures may exist in form but not in substance. When community involvement is reduced to consultation or ratification of pre-determined decisions, accountability becomes procedural rather than transformative, undermining the democratic rationale of decentralisation (Arnstein, 1969). Yet, context-specific, qualitative evidence on how SMC actually engages in financial oversight and decision-making at the school level remains limited.

This study addresses this gap by critically examining the operational realities of SMC participation in a Ghanaian public basic school, focusing on financial transparency and decision-making processes. Understanding these dynamics is essential not only for strengthening school governance in Ghana but also for informing broader debates on decentralisation and participatory accountability in education systems.

1.2 Research Questions

The study was guided by the following research questions:

- i. How does the SMC promote financial transparency and accountability in Ghanaian public basic schools?
- ii. In what ways does the SMC participate in decision-making processes in Ghanaian public basic schools?

II. LITERATURE REVIEW

2.1 Theoretical Review

Participatory Decision-Making Theory provides the analytical lens for this study, positing that genuine participation entails shared authority, empowerment, and mutual accountability rather than mere consultation (Arnstein, 1969; Vroom & Yetton, 1973). Arnstein's (1969) Ladder of Citizen Participation distinguishes tokenistic involvement (e.g., informing or placation) from substantive citizen power (e.g., partnership or delegated control).

Similarly, Vroom and Yetton's (1973) model highlights how stakeholder inclusion in complex settings like schools enhances decision quality, legitimacy, and commitment. These frameworks are particularly relevant to decentralized education governance, where the School Management Committee (SMC) represents an institutionalised attempt to operationalise participatory ideals (Fung & Wright, 2003; GES, 2019). The theory enables a critical assessment not just of SMC existence, but of the depth, power dynamics, and quality of engagement in practice, key to evaluating whether Ghana's decentralisation achieves transformative rather than symbolic accountability (Bruns et al., 2011).

2.2 Empirical Review

2.2.1 Decentralisation and School Governance

Empirical research on decentralisation in education reveals mixed outcomes, with formal autonomy often undermined by persistent central control, capacity gaps, and elite capture. In diverse low- and middle-income contexts,

decentralisation has failed to consistently improve accountability or learning outcomes due to inadequate resource alignment and limited downward accountability (Keddie, 2015; Kameshwara et al., 2024).

Critically, it has been noted that while structures like SMC promise community empowerment, participation frequently remains procedural, with power concentrated among school leaders or district officials (Essuman & Akyeampong, 2011). In Ghana, this tension is evident: decentralisation policies (e.g., FCUBE) aimed to enhance local responsiveness, yet evidence indicates persistent hierarchical dynamics that limit substantive community influence (Kwaah & Nishimuko, 2023). These findings challenge the optimistic assumptions of early decentralisation advocates, suggesting that without deliberate power redistribution and capacity support, reforms risk reproducing inequalities rather than democratising governance.

2.2.2 Functions of School Management Committees in Decentralised Education Systems

Cross-contextual empirical studies portray SMC as multifunctional but variably empowered bodies. In settings like Pakistan and Tanzania, SMC contributes to resource mobilisation, infrastructure oversight, and community linkage, yet its authority is often advisory rather than decisive (Adil et al., 2018; Maeda, 2015). A key critique emerges around capacity constraints: low financial literacy and unclear mandates reduce SMC to symbolic roles, undermining their potential for accountability (Rahim, 2019). Compared with settings where training and clear guidelines are absent, SMC demonstrates stronger contributions to monitoring and local responsiveness (Geofrey, 2015).

In Ghana, similar patterns hold, with SMC active in socially oriented tasks (e.g., mobilization) but weaker in strategic domains. This disparity highlights how institutional design influences effectiveness and questions whether decentralisation truly devolves power or merely shifts implementation burdens downward.

2.2.3 School Management Committees and Financial Transparency in Public Basic Schools

Empirical evidence on financial oversight consistently reveals gaps between policy intent and practice. Studies across Africa and Asia show SMC positioned to monitor budgets and expenditures, yet principal dominance, weak controls, and limited member literacy often confine oversight to symbolic approval (Dwangu & Mahlangu, 2021; King & Mestry, 2023; Faku & Mulaudzi, 2024). In South Africa and Indonesia, for instance, transparency improves only when SMC engages actively in budget preparation supported by auditing and reporting systems (Ngcobo & Ndovela, 2024; Rizka et al., 2025).

Critically, these accounts expose a common failure: internal accountability loops that exclude broader stakeholders, eroding social trust and enabling potential misuse. In Ghanaian contexts, parallel weaknesses appear in restricted information access and reactive rather than proactive engagement; reinforcing broader critiques that participatory structures often legitimize rather than challenge existing power asymmetries (Abreh, 2017; Kwaah & Nishimuko, 2023).

2.2.4 School Management Committee in Ghanaian Public Basic Schools

In Ghana, studies document SMC's relative strength in community relations, resource mobilization, and infrastructure support, particularly in resource-constrained rural/peri-urban areas (Aryeh-Adjei, 2021; Andoh-Robertson et al., 2020). However, multiple investigations converge on critical limitations: participation is uneven, often confined to low-risk activities, with minimal influence over budgeting, strategic planning, or financial accountability (Kwaah & Nishimuko, 2023; Agbi et al., 2024). Abreh (2017), drawing from two districts, attributes underperformance to capacity deficits and passive involvement, while Kwaah and Nishimuko (2023) highlight how unclear mandates and weak enforcement perpetuate symbolic rather than substantive roles. It emphasizes the fact that decentralization is incomplete, where formal structures exist without the resourcing, guidelines, or power-sharing needed for genuine participatory governance.

III. METHODOLOGY

3.1 Research Design

This study employed a qualitative research approach guided by an interpretivist epistemological stance to examine how the school management committee (SMC) encourages accountability, transparency, and participatory decision-making in public basic schools. Qualitative research is particularly well-suited for examining governance processes, meanings, and connections as they are produced and experienced by participants in their natural surroundings (Creswell & Poth, 2016). In particular, the study focused on three public basic schools and used a case study approach. When the lines between a phenomenon and its context are blurred, case study design allows for a thorough, context-sensitive analysis of modern phenomena (Yin, 2018). A case study technique proved ideal for

capturing these intricacies because SMC practices are influenced by human interactions, institutional norms, and local governance dynamics.

The strategy allowed for a comprehensive examination of how participatory governance is implemented, negotiated, and limited at the school level rather than merely assessing the official status of SMC entities. This approach aligns with the study's theoretical foundation in participation Decision-Making Theory, which emphasizes the significance of quality, depth, and power dynamics in participation processes.

3.2 Research Setting

The study was conducted at Orange Stars R/C Basic School Complex in Mampong-Akuapem, Nana Ankobea Takyiwa School in Mampong-Akuapem, and PCE Demonstration Primary School in Akropong-Akuapem in the Akuapem North Municipality of the Eastern Region of Ghana. The municipality operates within Ghana's decentralized education governance framework and complies with national legislation for the establishment of school management committees.

The three basic schools were specifically selected since they are examples of public basic schools with formally created and functional SMC. The schools provided an appropriate environment for examining regular governance practices, community-school relations, and accountability procedures as envisioned by national education objectives. Conducting a thorough investigation within a specific school allowed for a concentrated exploration of institutional dynamics, decision-making processes, and accountability links that might be concealed in more general survey-based studies.

3.3 Participants and Sampling Strategy

The participants were those who had first-hand knowledge of the SMC's activities and were directly involved in school governance and decision-making processes. The headteacher and several members of the school management committee were among them. To choose individuals who were information-rich and pertinent to the study, a purposive sampling technique was used (Creswell & Poth, 2016).

This strategy made sense considering the study's emphasis on financial supervision, participatory decision-making, and governance duties. Due to their statutory duties for financial supervision, record-keeping, and communication with school administration, prominent office holders like the Chairperson, Treasurer, and Secretary were included in the SMC. Given their twin responsibilities as the school's administrative head and a statutory member of the SMC, the headteacher was designated as a key informant. Based on their interactions with the SMC and their perceptions of its impact on school operations, additional participants such as teachers, parents and community members were included.

Twenty-eight participants in all were interviewed. The majority of SMC members had completed secondary or higher education and had served for two to six years, allowing them to reflect on governance procedures with knowledge. Data collection was conducted until further interviews yielded no new themes, indicating the attainment of saturation (Hennink & Kaiser, 2022). Since the emphasis was on information power rather than statistical generalisation, the sample size was deemed sufficient for a comprehensive qualitative case study.

3.4 Data Collection

Semi-structured interviews were the main method used to gather data since they gave participants the freedom to express their experiences, opinions, and interpretations while allowing the researcher to go deeper into new topics. Because they strike a compromise between openness and consistency, semi-structured interviews are especially useful for examining power dynamics and governance procedures (Yin, 2018). Two interview guides were created: an SMC member interview guide with an emphasis on participation in budgeting and decision-making, perceived roles and duties, financial supervision procedures, and accountability and transparency systems.

An interview guide for the headteacher and teachers that focuses on experiences working with the SMC, financial and administrative process transparency, and observations of SMC operations. To protect privacy and minimise interference with class activity, interviews were held in private areas of the school at appropriate times for the participants. With the participants' informed consent, each interview was audio recorded and lasted roughly 30 to 45 minutes. In order to record contextual information, nonverbal clues, and reflections that aided in the interpretation of the data, field notes were also gathered. Once more, the participants' claims were verified using SMC minutes and the financial records of the chosen institutions. Strong convergence across data sources is revealed by triangulating financial records, SMC meeting minutes, and interviews.

3.5 Data Analysis

Thematic analysis was used to analyze the data in accordance with the methodical steps described by Braun and Clarke (2006). This approach was suitable for uncovering meaningful patterns in participant narratives and

connecting empirical results to the theoretical framework of the study. To obtain a general comprehension of the data, verbatim transcriptions of audio recordings were reviewed several times in conjunction with field notes. Descriptive codes were applied to significant data segments that were pertinent to the research objectives (e.g., budget approval rather than formulation, closed-loop accountability, reactive financial oversight).

Preliminary themes were produced by grouping related codes into more general categories. To guarantee coherence, internal consistency, and alignment with the entire dataset, themes were examined and improved. To convey its conceptual core, each theme was precisely defined and labelled. Illustrative quotes from participants were used to support the interpretation of themes in relation to Participatory Decision-Making Theory and the body of current literature.

3.6 Ethical Considerations

The study was conducted in accordance with the ethical precepts of voluntary participation, informed consent, confidentiality, and non-maleficence. Before data collection started, participants were fully informed about the goals, methods, and voluntary nature of the study. Every participant provided written informed permission. The study did not utilise participants' true names to safeguard their identities. Generic descriptors like "teacher" or "SMC member" were used to identify the participants. Only the researcher had access to the safely preserved audio recordings, transcripts, and field notes.

Participants were informed that they could leave the study at any time without consequences, and every effort was made to minimize potential discomfort or power-related risks, particularly given the hierarchical relationships found in school environments. Confidentiality, professionalism, and respect were maintained throughout the whole research process.

Interview excerpts are referenced in line with APA guidelines for personal communications. Each quotation is identified using a participant pseudonym alongside the approximate month and year of the interview (e.g. SMC member, Treasurer, September 2025). Specific interview dates are intentionally omitted to protect participant anonymity, in accordance with ethical standards for qualitative research conducted within small academic communities.

3.7 Trustworthiness and Rigor

The fundamental criteria for qualitative research, credibility, dependability, confirmability, and transferability, were methodically addressed to improve the study's reliability and methodological rigor (Lincoln & Guba, 1985).

Methodological triangulation enhanced credibility. Data came from a variety of sources, including semi-structured interviews with headteachers, teachers, and SMC members, as well as written records such as school financial statements and minutes from SMC meetings. By allowing for cross-verification of participants' assertions, the convergence of interview accounts with documentary data increased trust in the results. The researcher gained contextual knowledge and delved deeply into emerging themes through prolonged participation in the research settings and frequent interactions with participants.

Dependability was ensured by maintaining an open and transparent audit record of the research process. Topic formulation, data transcription, interviewing methods, sampling decisions, and coding processes were all well recorded. The adoption of a systematic, six-phase thematic analysis technique (Braun & Clarke, 2006) improved consistency in the interpretation of data across instances and participants, enabling a structured and reproducible analytical framework.

Confirmability was handled by clearly defining interpretations in the data. Descriptive statements were validated using verbatim quotes from participants and supporting data from SMC minutes and financial records. It was easier for the researcher to have an open mind and distinguish participant opinions from subjective assessments when reflexive memos were written during data processing. This reduced the likelihood that researcher bias would affect the findings.

Rich, detailed explanations of the research setting, such as the governing context of Ghanaian public basic schools, the functions of SMC, and the features of the study sites, were provided to promote transferability. Although statistical generalization is not the study's goal, readers and policymakers can evaluate the findings' application to comparable decentralized education contexts owing to the thorough contextualization.

Collectively, these tactics strengthened the study's contribution to research on participatory governance and accountability in education by ensuring that its conclusions are reliable, analytically sound, and transparently obtained.

3.8 Positionality Statement

The researcher adopted a reflective approach after realising that his positionality, assumptions, and social location might inherently affect the study. The researcher is a professional in the field of education with experience in academia and research on Ghanaian educational policy and governance. By providing a helpful contextual

understanding of decentralized education reforms, school management committees, and school-level governance practices, this background made it simpler to engage participants and explain institutional procedures.

However, this positionality also entailed the risk of presumptions about how SMC should operate within policy frameworks being taken for granted. Instead of imposing normative expectations derived from theory or policy, the researcher deliberately entered the field with an open, inquiry-driven attitude, allowing participants' perspectives and interpretations to lead data production and analysis.

Given the hierarchical ties between headteachers, teachers, and community members, power dynamics were also carefully taken into account. The researcher conducted interviews in a way that enabled participants to speak freely without fear of organizational repercussions and placed a strong focus on voluntary involvement, confidentiality, and neutrality. During the data collection process, care was taken to avoid aligning with any particular stakeholder group.

Reflexivity was maintained throughout the study process by taking descriptive notes and continuously reflecting on how the researcher's interpretations were shaped. This reflexive approach improved the study's analytical depth and ethical integrity by guaranteeing that the findings fairly represent participant perspectives while upholding a critical engagement with the broader governance environment.

IV. FINDINGS & DISCUSSION

4.1 Findings

Based on the two research questions of the study, which center on the function of SMC in advancing financial transparency and their involvement in decision-making, five principal themes with their corresponding sub-themes were identified. The findings are shown using direct statements from participants supported by SMC meeting minutes and financial statements. Presentation of Findings Based on Research Questions. Research Question 1: How does the SMC promote financial transparency and accountability in Ghanaian public schools? culminated in three themes with their corresponding sub-themes.

4.1.1 Theme 1: Limited Internal Financial Oversight

Subtheme 1.1: Knowledge of school revenue and expenses

The Interview data suggest that SMC members possess basic awareness of school revenue sources and expenditures, particularly PTA dues and minor internally generated funds. Some of the SMC members said:

"As SMC members, we are aware of the school's primary revenue streams, particularly the PTA dues. We ensure that all inflows and outflows are documented. (SMC Member, Treasurer, September, 2025)

"We are not totally in the dark because the headteacher usually explains to us how much money has been received and what it is meant for." (SMC Member, 7th September, 2025)

A review of SMC meeting minutes shows that financial matters are regularly listed as agenda items, typically under headings such as "Financial Update" or "Any Other Business." The minutes indicate that the headteacher often reports aggregate figures of funds received and spent, without attaching detailed breakdowns. For instance, entries frequently record statements such as "The headteacher briefed members on PTA contributions received and expenditures made" without itemised accounts.

Similarly, school financial statements confirm that income and expenditure records are maintained, particularly for PTA funds and minor grants. However, these records are largely administrative documents kept at the school office and are not referenced as having been disseminated beyond SMC meetings. This corroborates participants' assertions that they are "not totally in the dark," yet their knowledge is mediated almost entirely through headteacher explanations rather than independent scrutiny.

Subtheme 1.2: Oversight of micro grants and expenditure

Participants noted that SMC involvement is largely limited to acknowledging the receipt and use of government grants, especially capitation grants. Some of the members said:

"The headteacher notifies us when the government grant arrives and displays the receipts once the funds have been utilized." (SMC Member, 7th September, 2025)

"We primarily authorize costs for minor repairs or desk repairs. Larger financial choices aren't really for us. (SMC Member, 7th September, 2025)

SMC minutes reveal that notifications of grant disbursement are typically communicated after funds have been received, with discussions focusing on confirmation rather than planning. The minutes frequently document resolutions such as "Members were informed that the capitation grant had been received and utilised for minor repairs". There is little evidence of pre-expenditure deliberation.

Financial statements further show that expenditures authorised by the SMC are predominantly for low-cost items, such as desk repairs, cleaning materials, or minor infrastructure maintenance. Larger or strategic expenditures

are absent from SMC resolutions, confirming interview claims that “larger financial choices aren’t really for us.” This alignment between interview data and financial records reinforces the conclusion that SMC’s financial oversight is reactive and limited in scope.

4.1.2 Theme 2: Limited Financial Transparency Outside of the SMC

Subtheme 2.1: Restricted information exchange with teachers and parents

Teachers and parents reported that financial information is rarely shared beyond the SMC. A teacher explained that:

"We are informed that funds were utilized to fix the roof, but nobody provides us with the precise sum or breakdown of the funds." (Teacher, 7th September, 2025)

A parent added that:

"The financial details are only shared with the SMC members." As parents, we just learned that the issue had been resolved. (Parent, 7th September, 2025)

A review of SMC minutes shows no evidence of structured feedback mechanisms to teachers, parents, or the wider community. There are no recorded resolutions mandating public disclosure, parent briefings, or notice-board postings of financial summaries. Financial statements themselves are not appended to meeting minutes nor referenced as shared documents.

The documentary silence corroborates participants’ claims that while projects are announced as completed, financial details such as costs, sources of funds, and balances are withheld, reinforcing a pattern of internalised transparency rather than community-wide accountability.

Subtheme 2.2: Closed-loop accountability structures

The interview data highlighted a closed accountability loop between the headteacher and the SMC. A teacher commented that:

"Financial discussions are mainly between the headteacher and the SMC. It doesn't really extend beyond that particular group. (Teacher, 8th September, 2025)

A member from the community substantiated the claims of the teacher by explaining that:

"It ends when the SMC and the headteacher reach a consensus." There is no involvement from the larger community. (Community Member, 8th September, 2025)

SMC minutes consistently reflect financial decisions being concluded with statements such as “The committee agreed with the headteacher’s explanation” or “Members approved the expenditure.” There is no indication of escalation, external review, or community ratification.

Financial statements are signed primarily by the headteacher and SMC executives, with no evidence of independent verification or broader stakeholder endorsement. This confirms that accountability mechanisms terminate within a small governance circle, aligning with participants’ observations that “it ends when the SMC and the headteacher reach a consensus.”

4.1.3 Theme 3: Reactive Rather than Proactive Financial Engagement

Subtheme 3.1: Budget approval rather than budget development

SMC members reported that they approve budgets rather than develop them. This implies that the SMC members are not involved in the planning of the school budget. One of them explained that:

The school budget is not put together by us. We examine it before giving our approval once the headteacher brings it. (SMC Member, 8th September, 2025)

Analysis of budget-related entries in SMC minutes indicates that draft budgets are presented by the headteacher for approval, often with limited discussion. Phrases such as “The proposed budget was presented and approved” recur across meetings, with no recorded evidence of SMC-led budget formulation sessions.

Financial statements further show that expenditure categories align closely with pre-determined administrative templates, suggesting that budgeting is largely technocratic and school-led, with the SMC playing a legitimising rather than generative role.

Subtheme 3.2: Ratification-Driven Decision-Making

The participants indicated that almost all the time decisions are made by the management of the school and the approval of SMC members are sought. A participant said:

Nearly all of the time, decisions have already been made. Our only responsibility is to reach a consensus so that work can proceed. (SMC Member, 8th September, 2025)

Interview claims that SMC primarily ratifies pre-made decisions are reflected in the tone and structure of meeting minutes. Decisions are often recorded as “endorsed” or “approved”, with minimal deliberative language. There is little documentary evidence of alternative proposals, dissenting views, or negotiated compromises. This

convergence between interview data and minutes confirms a ratification-driven governance culture, where participation is procedural rather than substantive.

Research Question 2: In what ways does the SMC participate in decision-making processes in Ghanaian public basic schools? produced two themes with their corresponding sub-themes.

4.1.4 Theme 4: Strong Participation in Social and Infrastructural Governance

Subtheme 4.1: Community mobilisation and school maintenance

SMC is most active in community mobilisation, maintenance, and conflict mediation.

The headteacher said that:

"The SMC helps mobilize parents and community members to come and support the school when it needs cleaning or repairs." (Headteacher, 8th September, 2025)

A teacher added his voice by commenting that:

"They are very active when it comes to bringing the community together for school activities," said the head teacher. (Teacher, 8th September, 2025)

A review of SMC minutes reveals recurring agenda items and resolutions related to communal labour, school clean-up exercises, and routine maintenance activities. Phrases such as "Members agreed to mobilise parents for school maintenance" and "SMC resolved to organise communal labour for school cleaning" appear consistently across meeting records.

Further triangulation with financial statements confirms that these resolutions translate into action. Recorded expenditures for items such as cleaning materials, minor repairs, and community-supported maintenance activities align with the decisions captured in the minutes. Together, the minutes and financial records substantiate participants' claims, demonstrating that SMC involvement in community mobilisation is both documented and resourced.

Subtheme 4.2: Involvement in minor infrastructure decisions

The SMC's role in infrastructural decision-making is described by the headteacher as advisory and focused on minor repairs. A member stated that:

"If there is a broken door or window, the SMC advises on what should be fixed first." (Headteacher, 8th September, 2025)

SMC minutes, which frequently record discussions on prioritising repairs such as doors, windows, desks, and roofing sheets. Entries often indicate consensus-based decisions on "urgent minor repairs" rather than large-scale infrastructural development.

Financial statements further support this pattern, showing small, targeted expenditures for repairs and maintenance rather than capital-intensive projects. This triangulation suggests that while SMC does not control major infrastructure investments, they exert meaningful influence over day-to-day infrastructural upkeep.

Subtheme 4.3: Conflict mediation and relationship management

Participants consistently described the SMC as a mediating body that helps maintain harmonious relationships within the school community. Some of them said: *"The SMC typically intervenes to resolve conflicts amicably between parents and teachers." (Teacher, 8th September, 2025)*

"They assist in reducing tensions to prevent problems between the community and the school from getting worse." (SMC Member, 8th September, 2025)

SMC minutes, which frequently document conflict-related issues and their resolutions. Statements such as "Issue resolved amicably through SMC intervention" or "SMC mediated between parent and teacher" appear in records, providing concrete evidence of the committee's mediatory function.

The absence of financial expenditures linked to these activities further highlights that this role is relational rather than financial, reinforcing participants' portrayal of the SMC as a bridge between the school and the wider community.

4.1.5 Theme 5: Marginalisation from strategic and pedagogical decision-making

Subtheme 5.1: Exclusion from curriculum and instructional decisions

The dataset clearly indicates that the SMC involvement does not extend into pedagogical or curriculum matters. A member explained that:

"Teachers oversee instructional strategies and curriculum-related choices; the SMC is not directly involved." (Headteacher, 8th September, 2025)

This claim is triangulated by SMC minutes, which show little to no discussion of curriculum content, teaching strategies, or assessment practices. Agenda items overwhelmingly focus on welfare, discipline, maintenance, and community relations, confirming that instructional decisions remain within the professional domain of teachers and school leadership.

Subtheme 5.2: Peripheral role in strategic planning and budgeting

Participants acknowledged that while SMC is informed or consulted, SMC members do not lead strategic planning or budgeting processes. Some participants explained that:

"We are not involved in the writing of the school improvement plan, but we are informed about it." (SMC Member, 8th September, 2025)

"The headteacher and staff make the final decisions on planning and budgeting, but the SMC is consulted." (Teacher, 8th September, 2025)

SMC minutes often record brief updates on school plans or budgets presented by the headteacher, rather than joint deliberation or co-authorship of strategic documents. Financial statements similarly show that budget preparation and major financial decisions are administered by school leadership, with the SMC playing a largely advisory or oversight role.

4.2 Discussion

The study examined how Ghanaian public basic schools' SMC contributes to financial transparency and school-level decision-making. Based on the findings, SMC participates mostly in procedural rather than substantive ways, even while they are clearly active in normal operational and community-facing activities like supporting school programmes, attending meetings, and endorsing expenditures. Their ability to provide the kind of shared accountability and empowerment that Participatory Decision-Making Theory expects is hampered by their limited influence over important choices pertaining to budgeting, financial supervision, and strategic planning. The study discovers a sharp discrepancy between the participatory principles outlined in education policy frameworks and the realities of routine school governance procedures because school administrators still hold a significant amount of power, and SMC involvement is usually symbolic rather than revolutionary.

4.2.1 Financial Transparency and the Limits of Internal Accountability

The findings reveal that financial transparency within the school is largely internalised, confined to interactions between the headteacher and SMC members. While SMC members demonstrate basic awareness of school income and expenditure, their oversight is predominantly reactive and mediated through headteacher reports rather than independent scrutiny. This pattern aligns with empirical studies in Ghana and comparable contexts, which show that SMC often lacks access to detailed financial information and possesses limited authority to interrogate spending decisions (King & Mestry, 2023; Dwangu & Mahlangu, 2021).

From a participatory governance perspective, such closed-loop accountability falls short of transparency as conceptualised in the literature. Transparency requires not only record-keeping but also the open dissemination of comprehensible financial information to the wider school community, enabling social accountability and collective oversight (Bruns et al., 2011; UNESCO, 2009). The absence of structured feedback mechanisms to parents and teachers in this study reinforces concerns that decentralised accountability structures may reproduce hierarchical control rather than democratise governance.

4.2.2 Participation without Power and Tokenistic Governance

A key contribution of this study lies in revealing a clear hierarchy of participation. SMC is highly active in community mobilisation, minor infrastructure decisions, and conflict mediation domains that are socially valuable but strategically low-risk. In contrast, they are marginalised from budgeting, strategic planning, and pedagogical decision-making. This pattern reflects what Arnstein (1969) describes as tokenism, where participation exists but does not entail real power.

Participatory Decision-Making Theory emphasises that meaningful participation involves shared authority and influence over outcomes (Vroom & Yetton, 1973). However, the findings indicate that SMC involvement is largely consultative or ratificatory, echoing studies that describe decentralisation reforms as redistributing responsibilities without redistributing power (Keddie, 2015). Consequently, SMC functions more as legitimising bodies than as co-decision-makers.

4.2.3 Structural and Capacity Constraints

The limited realisation of participatory governance observed in this study is shaped by structural and institutional factors identified in the literature. These include unclear operational guidelines, limited financial literacy among SMC members, and the concentration of technical authority in school leadership (Abreh, 2017; Rahim, 2019). In the absence of explicit procedural rules mandating SMC involvement in budgeting and planning, participation remains contingent on headteachers' discretion, reinforcing asymmetrical power relations.

V. CONCLUSION & RECOMMENDATIONS

5.1 Conclusion

This study concludes that while the SMC is firmly embedded within Ghana's decentralised education governance framework, its contribution to accountability and decision-making remains constrained. SMC plays meaningful roles in community mobilisation, minor infrastructure maintenance, and conflict mediation, yet their involvement in financial transparency, budgeting, and strategic planning is limited and largely procedural.

Financial accountability operates within a narrow governance circle, restricting wider community scrutiny and weakening social accountability. Decision-making processes further reflect participation without power, where SMC is more involved in implementing and endorsing decisions than in shaping them. These patterns indicate that participatory governance in practice falls short of the collaborative, empowering model envisaged by Participatory Decision-Making Theory. Ultimately, the study demonstrates the participation of SMC in school governance systems without power

5.2 Recommendations

The Ministry of Education and the Ghana Education Service should mandate transparent and easy financial reporting practices in public basic schools. This should entail the frequent release of school financial data through PTA meetings, school notice boards, and community forums in order to promote transparency outside of School Management Committees. Additionally, GES should establish targeted capacity-building initiatives that prioritize budgeting, school planning, and financial management to enhance SMC members' ability to participate in governance procedures. Clear and uniform operational standards that specifically outline the responsibilities of SMCs in budgeting, planning for school performance improvement, and monitoring activities should also be established and implemented in order to lessen discretionary exclusion and confusion in participatory procedures.

Monitoring school-level participatory governance practices should be a priority for district and regional education offices in order to enhance their oversight function. Instead of focusing only on following procedures, monitoring ought to encourage learning, introspection, and ongoing development of school governance. Headteachers and SMCs should receive technical assistance from district offices to enhance inclusive planning and financial accountability procedures. Indicators that evaluate the degree of accountability, transparency, and stakeholder participation in school decision-making processes should also be incorporated into monitoring frameworks.

Schools should adopt truly collaborative planning processes that involve SMC members from the outset of developing school budgets and School Performance Improvement Plans, rather than limiting their involvement to approval or ratification. SMC should frequently check on school finances and development projects and ensure that information is shared with the broader school community. Headteachers and other school administrators should encourage an atmosphere of openness and cooperative decision-making to recognise SMC as partners in governance rather than just symbolic participants.

Conflict of Interest

The author declares that he does not have any known competing financial interests or personal relationships that could have appeared to influence the work reported in this paper.

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