Dreams to Possibilities: A Qualitative Research Study on the Personal and Career Dreams of a Group of Young South Africans Living in Contexts of Poverty

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ABSTRACT Children living in contexts of poverty face challenges and obstacles in their attempts to rise out of their circumstances. These challenges and obstacles might deprive them of personal dreams which limit their capacity for learning and working. During a study-abroad initiative, American students explored the dreams of 26 young South Africans (YSAs) between 13 and 20 years who live in contexts of poverty using semi-structured interviews. The findings of this qualitative study indicate that, despite their adversities, participants still hope for a better future and are aware of the changes needed to create a better environment for themselves and their families. The identified inhibitors and enhancers to the realization of their dreams viewed from the perspective concerted cultivation theory illustrate that young people in contexts of poverty need more focused support than they currently receive in order to provide them with equal opportunities to realize their dreams.

INTRODUCTION

Poverty has perilous consequences for young people (Nelson and Prilleltensky 2010). Poor young people lack adequate housing, access to quality health care, proper nutrition, and adequate child care (Hlalele 2012). Even those who have their basic needs met might be denied opportunities available to their peers. Challenges associated with poverty such as low levels of education, substance abuse, crime, and violence may impact young people's ability even to know the broad set of possible dreams available to them. Tuason (2008) argued that rather than not having dreams, people eventually might abandon their dreams to protect themselves from disappointment that unfulfilled dreams can bring. It is therefore important to guide young people living in poverty to understand how their dreams can become possible to ensure that they will reach their potential, as suggested by Moore (2005). Such interventions can help them prepare adequately to pursue or to re-envision their dreams. In 2012 a group of undergraduate students from a public university in the United States visited South Africa to develop an understanding of contexts of poverty and to develop skills to actively engage in social change on completion of their studies. During this study-abroad initiative they explored the dreams of a group of 26 young South Africans (YSAs) between 13 and 20 years, living in contexts of poverty in the Western Cape, a province of South Africa. The results of this exploratory study are reported in this paper.

Problem Statement

The South African Schools Act (Department of Basic Education 1996) makes schooling compulsory for all children until they obtain the equivalent of Grade 9 or age 15. The ideal is to provide all YSAs the opportunity to develop their full potential. Although socio-economic barriers to learning is explicitly addressed in policy, the transmission of social class (dis)advantage across generations is well-documented in research literature (Cheadle and Amato 2011). YSAs living in contexts of poverty might therefore still be denied equal opportunities to turn their dreams into realities due to limited access to support services and resources in their schools and families (Carolissen 2012; Lund et al. 2009; Pillay and Wasielewski 2007).

According to Barbarin (2003) these experiences of poverty, combined with limited access to support services and resources might deprive these young people of hope that eventually inhibits academic progress and hampers their psycho-social development. Rising unemployment

further contributes to this sense of hopelessness as confirmed in the 2012 report of the National Youth Development Agency (News 24 2012). Yet, the current generation of YSAs is expected to carry the country forward. Therefore failure to conduct research to understand how they perceive the future and the challenges associated with obtaining their goals might result in continued exclusion from a better dispensation. Concurrently they might be stereotyped as a problem generation who are responsible for their situation based on dominant Western worldviews that they should take responsibility for their lives despite their circumstances.

This research study was purposively designed to address the perception that YSAs in contexts of poverty can take sole responsibility for their exclusion from opportunities. The research question in this study is: How do the dreams of YSAs living in contexts of poverty inform our understanding of the support they might need to realize their dreams?

METHODOLOGY

The research methodology is based on the ontological assumption that individuals develop subjective meanings of their experiences as they seek to make sense of the world in which they live (Creswell 2009). The researchers therefore recognized the specific context and historical and cultural setting in which the participants live. A qualitative, interpretive descriptive design was applied to explore the dreams of a group of YSAs. An interpretive descriptive design focuses on practice questions of inquiry and interpretively describes what the researcher learns and understands about the meanings of practice situations (St George 2010).

The participants included 26 YSAs living in contexts of poverty: 8 were primary school learners in a South African context, 11 were in secondary school, and 7 had dropped out of school. The sample was 46 percent female, and the age range was 13 to 20. The schools assisted the research team with the purposive selection of participants based on their age, living conditions, and ability to participate. Three corrupt interview files were discarded, leaving 23 interviews (7=primary, 10=secondary, and 6=not enrolled in school). Permission was obtained from the Department of Education before gaining access to the schools. Parents and caregivers provided informed consent and the YSAs provided informed assent.

As part of a study-abroad project, undergraduate students from a mid-size American university conducted face-to-face, semi-structured interviews with students on school premises (those YSAs no longer in school agreed to meet on school premises on a day school was not in session). The semi- structured interview provided interviewers the opportunity to ask open-ended questions to obtain a detailed picture of the participant's experiences of dreaming about their future (Smith and Osborn 2003; Willig 2008) in relation to their current situation. Semi-structured interviews include a degree of flexibility which allows researchers and participants to be guided by their interaction; from this, the researcher gains an understanding regarding participants' perceptions and experiences (Smith and Osborn 2003).

An interview guide ensured consistency; however, following recommendations from Fassinger (2005) and Kvale (1996), interviews consisted of standardized open-ended questions, conversational rapport-building, and probes. Students worked with faculty to develop these questions and probes. Interviewers informed respondents they could respond in English or Afrikaans (although interviewers could not understand Afrikaans, they could be translated later). One interviewee called upon a translator during the interview. Faculty members were available to assist students before, during, and after the interviews. The interviews were video-recorded with permission of the participants.

The video-recorded interviews underwent verbatim transcription, adhering to processes by Miles and Huberman (1994). Given that English is a second language for respondents, some responses may seem unconventional to native English speakers. Where appropriate, [sic] has been used to verify quotations accurately represent respondents' wording. Transcription resulted in 105 pages of single-spaced data. The average length of interviews was 22.8 minutes, with a range of 13 to 47 minutes. The data were analysed using the process developed by Braun and Clarke (2006) which includes generating initial codes – i.e. classifying or categorising individual fragments of data (Babbie 2011), searching for themes, reviewing themes, and defining and naming themes.

Trustworthiness

Trustworthiness in this study has been ensured through the crystallisations (Ellingson 2009). The following were done to crystallise the data: multivocality were obtained by using various groups (primary, secondary and out-of-school youth) to ensure obtaining various viewpoints; using open-ended questions avoided influence; and sufficient time allowed participants to answer. The importance of bracketing personal assumptions (researcher bias) was emphasised while preparing the students. An American and a South African partner reviewed the results of the study before dissemination.

RESULTS

The results of this study indicate that these children dreams about a better life as well as a future career. In some instances the realization of these dreams are inhibited and in other instances the realization of the dreams are enhanced.

Dreams about a Better Life

A better life implied living in a more enabling environment. A more enabling environment was described as an environment that is free from domestic, as well as community disturbances that make it difficult to accomplish their dreams. With reference to domestic disturbances they referred to the influence of *"having so many people that makes noise around when you have to focus on your schoolwork."* Community disturbances included fear of gangs.

It's not safe for children to be in this area because of all the gangs. Every day we see people stab each other in front of our faces, or we're just going to the mobile, and we're going to buy something and they just rob it from us and told us "if you're not going to give it to us, then we're going to kill you or your mother."

Most participants expressed a desire to leave this environment and live in a quieter and more caring *"vibe"* than the existing rudeness and lack of care that, *"keeps you back"*. One participant described such a quiet, caring environment as follows: *"children must be free to play in the streets. And the children must not get involved with drugs."* Another YSA suggested that violence is prevented by setting up *"community centers to get the youth off the streets."*

Along with the desire for an enabling environment almost all participants expressed the desire to relocate own a home somewhere else and to relocating their family with them: *"I would buy my own home. Me and my father and my brother would live there."*

A better life furthermore implied that the participants want to be different than certain family and community members, who *"sit there and drink, and ... do all kinds of things."* One participants indicated that he chooses to be different from his own mother who expects the grandmother to take care of her child while she goes to clubs and drink while *"she needs to be a role model for our kids ...."* However, despite their desire to be different, many respondents acknowledge the difficulty in maintaining a positive attitude about their dreams given the negative surroundings.

Dreams about a Future Career

The careers considered by most of the participants were pastors, police officers, actresses, firefighters, clothing designers, social workers, counselors, chefs, and economists. A large number of youths' career-related dreams involved becoming professional athletes. Responses ranged from, *"My goal is to be a golf player"* to *"My dream ... my dream is cars ... to race cars."* This tendency might be ascribed to the fact that most respondents indicated that they participated in related activities whether they engaged regularly for fun in the streets or formally through team membership. The limited scope of choice is seemingly based on a lack of information regarding careers and career choices available to them. YSAs, who had dropped out of school, for example considered finding paid work to help their family as their dream.

Nearly all participants indicated a desire to give something back to their communities. Many YSAs mentioned career options that enable them to help others. Participants who wanted to become teachers expressed their desire to guide young children to develop their potential. One participant stated: *"One day I want to become a teacher* [because] *I would like to learn* [sic] *children how to, um, to look forward into their future about how – what they want to be one day ...."*

Another helping career was becoming a medical practitioner. Rather than knowing a doctor personally, the YSAs claimed that what they saw

of doctors on TV influenced their dreams; one YSA said, *"Yes. I've seen on TV that people, they're getting ill and the doctors, they help them. I see that that's good work for me."*

These responses indicate that, although limited, YSAs have career dreams and that those dreams are often linked with helping others – whether it be helping young people develop their abilities, providing for their families, or helping community members – they are motivated to give back and to make a difference. They desire to serve as a positive force. *"you must go back to your community and try to find someone who wants to be someone someday, and you help them to be someone – who they want to be.*"

The Realization of Dreams

The data clearly indicated how the realization of their dreams were inhibited and enhanced in their interactions with other people and their environment. With reference to inhibiting the realization of their dreams, it was evident that participants do not have an understanding of the steps necessary to achieve career goals. When asked questions such as*, "How do you plan to make that happen?"* participants responded as follows*: "Respect your mother and your father"; "If I work harder and harder than I can get my dreams."; "go to college"* and *"If I learn then I must come to be to do the work like a doctor, and if you don't learn you don't get to be a doctor."* These statements indicate that they did not know the processes associated with achieving their dreams.

This lack of concrete plans often translated into a lack of concern over potential obstacles. Few participants had fears about their future and were unaware of obstacles that might prevent them from realizing their dreams. Only one participant cited that finances might prevent her from attaining her goals.

The realization of their dreams was furthermore inhibited by their choice of role models who are unrelated to their career goals. When asked about role models, participants offered a variety of role models including, Lady Gaga, Beyonce, Michael Jackson, or well-known professional athletes. One young man who wants to be an economist cited Hank McGregor and Len Jenkins. A participant who wanted to be a doctor cited Mariah Carey as her role model, while another YSA said she knew someone who

had become a doctor but not *how* the woman had become a doctor. Other YSAs talked about the positive influence of coaches and teachers but did not necessarily perceive these individuals as role models for achieving their career goals. Some YSAs cited a family member, usually mothers or grandmothers, as role models of how to persevere as indicated:

I grew up without a father, and she was the only person who took care of me. It was very hard ... there wasn't money all the time so my mom used to—how can they say – my mother went to people to ask for help, and she didn't give up on me even though I was just a little baby, and she was a teenager.

In fact, only two participants articulated the benefit of knowing someone in their field of interest. One participant said:

And maybe if I, how can I say, meet more people who can accompany me with my dream who already does the work that I want to be – to do in the future, I would do better.

Another participant indicated that seeing her mother working in social work helped her decide that she wanted the same career. She indicated her mother could help with career preparation and would have the right connections.

The YSAs definitely have role models and can cite the attributes they admire about those individuals. However, very few of them cited role models where there was a specific link between the admired abilities or attributes and the YSA's career dreams.

With reference to the enhancing the realization of their dreams, several YSAs presented making their family, more specifically their mothers and grandmothers proud, as a motivating factor for them to achieve their dreams. One YSA said, *"go to school and make your family proud and your mother.*" Several other participants cited wanting to work for their future children. Even those YSAs who articulated family problems cited a desire to help or to reunite their families.

The realization of their dreams is also enhanced by the fact that they appreciate the role of education to steer them toward achieving their dreams, as stated: *"if you're not educated, you can't go anywhere."* Many YSAs recognized the role of teachers and coaches who help them practice and be disciplined so they can achieve their dreams. An example is: *"He's like inspiring us ... telling us to stay away from wrong things."* Through these encouragements, they come to

like value learning: *"I learn every day. If I've done my homework or my teacher don't give me homework, then I go to my books and then I learn."*

Even YSAs that dropped out school indicated that they would have preferred to remain in school. One interviewee said that he did not stop because he wanted to, but because his grandfather needed care when he was in Grade 7. After the grandfather passed away three months later, he was unable to catch up with the work, so he never returned, but he would have loved to complete school.

All participants discussed the importance of support for enhancing the realization of their dreams. Most participants cited at least one interpersonal source of support, and many cited multiple sources. Often, support that implied covering basic needs and affection revolved around grandmothers or mothers. In some instances mothers were mentioned for encouraging the YSA to pursue their dreams.

Other people cited friends as a source of support stating: *"What makes me happy is to be with my friends and to talk with my friends about my problems."* In addition, several YSAs also served as sources of support for siblings or classmates, as indicated by the following statements: *"Every night I encourage him with school, and I help him with his work and encourage him"* and

I must say that I share my dreams with children at school every day ... I often tell the teachers that they can send the children to me because I know how it feels to go through things that they go through.

DISCUSSION

The findings provide empirical support that YSAs living in poverty, even those who dropped out of school, are *not* resigned to a belief that they will live their entire lives in abject poverty. They are aware of the influence of their environment on their lives and seem to understand how this environment needs to change to facilitate a better life, as indicated by dreams to live with family in communities characterized by quiet, safety, mutual respect, and mutual support. In many instances these YSAs also observed how adults allowed their environments to define them and expressed the intention not to allow this to happen to them. Despite the adversity they wit-

ness regularly, YSAs still hope for a better future, which suggests a certain level of resilience. Resilience involves positive adaptation to adversity and is a dynamic, context-bound transaction (Theron and Theron 2010). A resilience-based approach to youth development is based on the principle that *all* people have the ability to overcome adversity and to succeed despite their circumstances (Masten et al. 1990) and ties well with social justice. These findings support Moore's (2005) claim that youth living in poverty are often determined to escape stagnant areas but that limited skills, limited social networks, and lack of access to information often undermine this desire. From the perspective that wellness also implies fairness towards people in terms of social and community life (Prilleltensky 2012), the fact these YSAs dream for these things rather than expect them indicates injustice.

Furthermore, the findings indicate that these YSAs have career dreams. A concern is that these dreams are of limited scope and seem mainly influenced by media. Granted, it is not unusual for young people to dream of careers involving celebrity or prestige. Becoming professional athletes might not provide viable options for these YSAs. In fairness, these YSAs should not be participating in sport without learning the realities of pursing a professional athletic career. Additionally, the dreams associated with helping their communities might not necessarily be the careers in which these YSAs will excel. Vocational anticipatory socialization suggests that children develop educational and career interests through messages that shape their career beliefs and expectations (Buzzanell et al. 2011). When parental work messages are absent, young people miss communication that may steer them toward or away from certain careers (Myers et al. 2011). Therefore, tying this information with spontaneous development (Lareau 2002, 2003), where parents tend not to cultivate children through conversation, children miss important socialization simply by not hearing family talk about work.

As a principle of social justice, providing equal opportunities in the schooling system (Ayers et al. 2009) necessitates the provision of support to children living in contexts of poverty to enable them to shape career dreams in a way that enables them to reach their full potential. In the absence of such support these YSAs might

be excluded from the job market. Even with current unemployment rates, companies leave jobs unfilled because the system is not producing YSAs with the necessary training (Wild and Cohen 2013).

Results indicate that YSAs' dreams are inhibited by a lack of career socialization. This limitation was clear in the way youth discussed the steps necessary to achieve career goals. Similar to Black immigrant students in the U.S., not only does financial need present challenges, but so does lack of college preparatory information (Erisman and Looney 2007). Various studies also have shown that the school-university gap increasingly is leaving YSAs underprepared for higher education (Mji 2002) and is linked to inequities in the school system (Hay and Marais 2004). A study by Buthelezi et al. (2009) found that learners' career challenges were often contextually based, and that their career needs were a response to their career challenges.

Career socialization can occur via many processes, but a large part of it tends to happen via indirect and direct communication within the home (Buzzanell et al. 2011). Whereas it may be inappropriate to challenge cultural norms surrounding how SA parents interact with their children, it may suggest a re-examination of practices and underlying assumptions in SA schools. Differing approaches to child-rearing may lead to the transmission of differential advantages to certain children, allowing some to have greater verbal agility, more comfort with authority figures, and more familiarity with abstract concepts (Lareau 2003). Perhaps the very outcomes valued in SA schools works in certain SA districts but not in poor districts. Much like Lareau (2003) said of U.S. children, this translates to a system where children in higher socioeconomic families learn the cultural codes, styles, and communication that facilitates their successful integration into social institutions, but poorer children do not.

This type of inequity can be explained using the framework of Bandura's (1969) social learning theory, which emphasizes the ways people learn acceptable behaviors and attitudes. Namely, people learn by observing a role model's behavior and then imitating, or modeling, that behavior. Cognitive, vicarious, self-regulatory, and self-reflective processes all play prominent roles in psychosocial functioning (Bandura 1986). Ultimately, personal and social change occurs as the result of the reciprocal interplay of cognitive, behavioral, and environmental factors. This framework, then, helps explain YSAs' efforts to bounce back in what Theron and Theron (2010) described as contextually and culturally relevant ways while also conveying a shared responsibility to cultivate resources that facilitate resilience in culturally appropriate ways.

With regard to enhancers, YSAs living in poverty seem motivated by a need to please their families by achieving specific goals. Baumeister and Leary (1995) discussed the belongingness hypothesis as a substantial component behind the need to achieve. The need to belong is linked with approval, intimacy, and maintaining social bonds and is almost as compelling as the need for food. The need to belong should stimulate goal-directed activity designed to satisfy it (Baumeister and Leary 1995). Perhaps the resilience of some interviewees buffered negativity from family and peers; for others, negative comments challenged their need to belong, and the pressure to belong induced them to abandon their dreams (or at least talking about them) in order to remain accepted. YSAs furthermore appreciated education as a way to realize their dreams. Life skills curricula serve as a significant resilience-promoting resource (Ebersohn 2008). In fact, schools are the most emphasized resilience-encouraging community protective resource when they provide: fair and helpful teachers, safe space, adequate resources, aesthetic environments, academic excellence, and meaningful after-school activities (Theron and Theron 2010).

Social support is subjective and involves nonverbal and verbal communication intended to seek or to provide help (Burleson and MacGeorge 2002). In addition, whereas support is important during crisis, everyday support tends to play a more important role in people's lives (Leatham and Duck 1990). Thus, support plays a major role in relational development, maintenance, and satisfaction (Cunningham and Barbee 2000), and close relationships are important for well-being (Prilleltensky 2012). These YSAs typically could count on *some* support, and given the integral role of supportive behaviors as behaviors that enable family and community members to serve as protective resources that enable resilience (Theron and Theron 2010), it is important to facilitate support in YSAs' lives.

Despite the fact that YSAs perceived support as an enhancer, it is insufficient. One reason is that the sources of support varied widely. In itself, this is not problematic since it is beneficial for people to have a wide support network (Mickelson et al. 2001). However, seeking support (even through simple self-disclosure) is risky (Goldsmith and Parks 1990). Furthermore, a lack of support or negatively perceived support has negative consequences (Dakof and Taylor 1990).

Despite having at least one person to talk with about their dreams, it is possible that receiving inconsistent or negative support puts YSAs "out of face." Face is socially constructed, and people are intimately connected to face (Agne et al. 2000). People conduct themselves unconsciously in a manner that follows rules of self-respect (Goffman 1967). However, people become "out of face" when they are unsure what type of identity to project or others have questioned their face (Agne et al. 2000). For example, Leatham and Duck (1990) found that direct past experience with another person's performance of social support affects an individual's willingness to seek future support from that individual. Hesitation to share dreams – or abandoning them – may result from uncertainty about what type of identity to project due to support inconsistency.

Putting these constructs together — socialization, supportive processes, and the role of others in goal-setting – show how the community can help restore justice since many different community members have the ability to fulfill these needs/roles through interpersonal connection. The need for support and belonging could be used to stimulate positive interpersonal connections (Baumeister and Leary 1995) toward the betterment of all. Experiencing neighbors as protective and nurturing may make poverty and danger less salient features of youths' self-images, and one way to accomplish this is to help community members engage in better resource sharing and in affirming behaviors (Barbarin and Richter 1999).

Adults need greater awareness about how communication shapes YSA's perceptions of their dreams and ability to realize them. Moreover, the intricate ways that school, family, and community intersect complicate this process. Although youth receive some support, it is insufficient and/or inconsistent, especially with regard to socializing YSAs to have the necessary skills to realize their dreams. Beyond an initial broad framework of interpersonal relationships and socialization, these data pointed to *specific* socializing processes and led the researchers back to the literature — where concerted cultivation/spontaneous development (Lareau 2003) became relevant as it relates to well-being and social justice.

Masten (2001) asserted that resilience is nurtured by common everyday resources. "… resilience is not rare, and active steps can be taken to develop and sustain resilience among youth who are placed at risk by ordinary and extraordinary adversities" (Theron and Theron 2010: 6). Therefore, schools should take the lead by facilitating socialization processes that normally are expected and provided by the families of youth to ensure a socially just space for YSAs. Given the transactional nature of resilience (Theron and Theron 2010), schools can and should draw upon other community resources to facilitate these processes.

Several limitations should be noted. First the suggestions provided are theoretical and subject to discussion. We do not claim this is a panacea. These interviews represent a limited number of YSAs and are not generalizable. Second, language/translation barriers between the American interviewers and the YSAs may have affected the depth and nature of responses. In addition, an observational component or interviewing parents, teachers, or other adults could shed insight about YSAs' dreams.

CONCLUSION

Young people living in poverty dream about their futures. Unlike other researchers who found that adults have dreams for their children, this study suggests that YSAs have dreams for themselves. Context matters, and the relative extent of youth poverty depends on many different factors. Therefore, exploring the best interventions for helping YSAs to cultivate and achieve their dreams is important for restoring justice by enhancing well-being at the intrapersonal, interpersonal, community, and societal levels.

RECOMMENDATIONS

Strengthen Young SAs Capability to Facilitate a Better Life for Themselves

Research suggests that young people view rights and responsibilities as part of citizenship and want to participate in their communities. Through programs focused on problem-solving

skills and visualization, YSAs can develop plans to improve their communities and have a voice about matters that affect them can empower them .

Encourage Youth to Obtain the Highest Possible Academic Qualifications

Policy makers can draw from the broader literature on immigrant students and focus on family obligation as a motivator for adolescents.

Address the Lack of Career Socialization

Peer mentors can foster a sense of support and guidance, so perhaps university students can mentor younger learners. Alternatively, schools might transform some teachers into mentors where teachers can develop close interpersonal relationships with students through goal-setting and career socialization through interactions with role models.

Enhance Interpersonal Connectedness

Interventions, especially those focused on cultivating interpersonal relationships, might be one way to increase buy-in and success. Mentoring or youth citizenship programs might foster specific skills needed by YSAs for pursuing their dreams. Having outlets to talk about their dreams and to develop goals provides YSAs with more concrete plans since developing fundamental knowledge and working vocabularies is critical to goal achievement. School curricula should offer more instruction in interpersonal skills so that introverted students can develop strong relationships and increase their well-being. Programs outside of school could provide such opportunities. Professionals need to partner with educators, communities, and community representatives to understand better the local elements of resilience.

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