

**Towards Theory Building: An Exploration of Experiences and Perceptions Associated with Youth Mentoring Practice in Southern Africa. A Grounded Theory Study in Zambia.**

The majority of disadvantaged youth today, world over, lack positive role models and meaningful relationships with supportive adults, within their immediate families and communities (DuBois et al., 2011; Mulenga, 2013). This problematic situation of the youth, of which Zambian youths are not an exception, can be attributed, but not limited, to three main contributing factors: 1) children are born in families where parents/guardians work long hours and thus have limited time to spend with their children, 2) in terms of education, children lack support that can come from adults within and outside their families, as adults available have no or have little capacity to do so because they are mostly early school leavers themselves, and 3) they live in communities which have limited youth-centred opportunities where they can engage in civil activities, and where they can work together with adults (mentors) who are more knowledgeable in order to share in learning and build skills and competencies which could contribute to their well-being, families and communities (Beegle, 2003; Hirsch, 2007; Mulenga, 2013; UNICEF, 2013).

Most of these disadvantaged young people are perceived to be “at risk” for showing poor developmental outcomes, including antisocial behaviour, low development of cognitive skills, lack of self-confidence and low school achievements, and are mostly targeted for mentoring relationships (Schwartz & Rhodes, 2016). Pryce et al. (2015:191) describe mentoring as a preventative, mitigation, correction and an enhancing social strategy, which has many significant potentials, including to enhance social relationships, which may lead to improve other important relationships between youth and parents, teachers, other adults and peers (Pryce et al., 2015; Rhodes et al., 2006). As well as the potential to reduce the chances and/or prevent youth from becoming involved in illicit activities (DuBois et al., 2011). Beegle (2003:16) also discovered that mentoring plays a significant role in disadvantaged children’s basic and higher education – that it has the potential to reduce the stress of poverty and allow disadvantaged children to focus on their learning and studies. Moreover, Evans (2005:22) argues that most youth in their adolescence stage 13–17 years, need support to navigate through that stage of life, as most of them do not know what they want and thus, have no clear life plans in the now or future. Allen and Eby (2008:402) support Evans’ (2005:22) assertion and agree that mentoring relationships are particularly important and most beneficial to adolescents. Lerner et al. (2006:3) also sees mentoring, formal and informal, as a key resource for promoting positive youth development.

Although, despite youth mentoring being a key resource and seriously growing social intervention strategy globally (Busse et al., 2018; DuBois et al., 2011; Lerner et al., 2006 Rhodes & DuBois, 2008), defining the concept of youth mentoring, poses a challenge to researchers as there is no one specific definition (Busse et al., 2018; Kadzomba, 2015). This challenge can be attributed to DuBois et al. (2011:66) who describe youth mentoring as a flexible intervention strategy that can be applied in diverse contexts for a wide range of purposes. It is clear that due to its flexible nature and thus, its use in diverse contexts, it is difficult to have a universally accepted definition (Busse et al., 2018; Kadzomba, 2015).

Furthermore, a substantial amount of literature based on diverse scientific studies of youth mentoring, only represents certain regions of the world, mostly USA and UK (Busse et al., 2018). Nonetheless, there is a general agreement that mentoring can assist young people globally to overcome disadvantage and change their lives (Brady & Dolan, 2007; Busse et al.,

2018; Evans, 2005; Kadzomba, 2015). There is, however, seemingly limited literature, based on empirical foundations, to inform youth mentoring practice in other parts of the world, particularly Africa (Kadzomba, 2015). For instance, anecdotal data in Zambia shows that apparent youth mentoring activities exist, however the overall practice around it is not known empirically. Therefore, explanations of what youth mentoring is, in the Zambian context may be flawed. Although, one can argue that youth mentoring, being a new subject of research in Africa, could explain the reason for having limited literature to explain its practice (DuBois et al., 2006; Kadzomba, 2015). It is against this background that I intend to conduct this constructivist grounded theory study (Charmaz, 2006), to explore experiences and perceptions associated with youth mentoring practice in Zambia, from the perspective of the mentors and mentees themselves.

Given the challenges of defining youth mentoring and, limited extant theory on youth mentoring in Zambia, this study is significant as it is based in the context where youth mentoring activities seem evident but may not have been scientifically explored. It is thus necessary to conduct research, which may significantly contribute to the developing and strengthening of the practice of youth mentoring in Zambia. This study will also present to policy-makers and youth development practitioners, an in-depth understanding of mentoring as a social intervention strategy that may significantly contribute to positive youth development in the country. Knowing the experiences of youth mentoring from the youths themselves and the mentors can inform the formulation and implementation of effective programmes that would best suit Zambian youths. Rhodes and Lowe (2008:13) assert that mentoring should be informed by research focusing on what constitutes high quality mentoring relationships, in order for them to be effective.

Moreover, the study will generate information that will contribute and strengthen existing global literature on youth mentoring. Conducting a study in the context that is considerably different from United States of America, where formal youth mentoring is said to have originated (Schwartz & Rhodes, 2016), could challenge current assumptions that are mainly based on research done in the west. The study will also form basis for future research including studies on benefits of youth mentoring in countries in the south and, comparative studies of youth mentoring in countries in the south and west, aimed at learning from each other.

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