The youth category in South Africa

- In demographic terms, youth in South Africa forms a significant category. More than 60% of the overall population is formed by people who are below the age of 30 years.¹

- More than half of this figure are young people who are of school-going age (that is, about 20 years and below).

- When disaggregated by race, 65% of the total young people is formed by black (African) South Africans.²

- Many of the young people in South Africa are in schools. The rest is in Higher Education Institutions; or are in Adult Centres (finishing schools), or are doing some piece jobs somewhere or just joining a large ‘pool’ of unemployed people in South Africa.

- A body of knowledge available indicates that young people in South Africa carry numerous burdens. This does not mean young people in the rest of the world are not carrying burdens of their own. I am just particularly focusing on young South Africans.

- For example, young people in South Africa are one of the most vulnerable groups affected by HIV and AIDS in many ways. Young people who have experienced death in the family because of AIDS often remain traumatised.

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² Ibid. 2001.
and they often do not have access to counselling services. Like all South Africans, young people are also significantly affected by crime, poverty, lack of formal education and lack of formal employment.

- In addition, other social issues such as gender-based violence, drug abuse and teenage pregnancy complicate the lives of many young people.

- In the research that I have conducted (some of it is still ongoing) at Umlazi township and Ixopo rural areas in KwaZulu-Natal, primary and secondary school learners, who have been directly affected by HIV and AIDS and are living in poverty-stricken environment, have expressed their worries about the contexts in which they live.

- Primary school learners in the rural area expressed how they see death (suicide) as an option. This is because while these young people do not have adults who support and care for them, they have to face hunger plus the many cruelties that are brought about by crime.

- Most of them live in fear. They are scared that they might be raped or bitten by snakes when traveling to or from school as they have to travel across bushes (forests). They fear they might be shot or stabbed by criminals who break into their homes in search for food. Some fear that they might die due to TB that has already infected them; or that their relatives who are infected by HIV or have AIDS might die; as well as many other factors that cause young people to live in fear.

- Township learners expressed how they are scared of being shot while going to the tuck shops, which are sometimes next to tarverns. Travelling on the roads is dangerous as there are “hooligans” in every corner who might demand the learners’ money or their possessions.

- Besides, accidents that happen on the South African roads are also a worry to young people who have to use those roads every day when going to and from school or when they are sent by their parents to buy cards for electricity, or goods from shops or tuck shops.

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• All this happens in the changing environment. Young people do not only have to survive rape, road accidents, poverty and gangsters that rule some of the places in townships, but a combination of a materialist and consumerist culture means that having money, as well as the lack of money forms the key part of the world of youth. In this context of a depressing environment, which also have a consumerist and materialist culture, some of the young people find themselves lending up in crime.

• For example, in the study I did at Umlazi township, male high school learners reported how they are now trapped in alcohol and drug abuse and other criminal activities, which make them do things at school and at home, which they would not like to do4.

• Because of the changes in the way families are organised and function, which have resulted in lower quality “adult-child” closeness (even in families where parents are still alive), parental authority is sometimes lacking or challenged.

• What I am presenting here, might sound like a depressing situation if we think that young people who form a large part of the overall population carry the most of the social burdens.

• It might even be more depressing if we further think that this large group of the population is also the group that will form the future society of the country.

• However, the history of our country has taught us about the strength that youth has and the prominent positive role that youth groups and youth organizations can play in society.

South African historical context

• Historically, since the Congress Youth League was formed in 1943, young people in South Africa had played a significant role in political resistance and the struggle against apartheid.

• The 1976 student uprisings in Soweto, and the many students uprisings in different parts of the country that happened thereafter in the 70s, 80s and 90s underscored the centrality of the position of youth in the struggle.

• The 1976 students of Soweto were also living in a very depressing apartheid environment. Besides the ‘inferiorating’ Bantu education that was delivered in schools at that time, conditions in Black Townships were appalling. Working conditions, under which their parents were working for the meagre wages that they earned, were humiliating. And, as if that was not enough, the government of the day had built beer halls in townships, to ensure that the stressed Black communities drown their frustrations and probably themselves in liquor.

• This was also happening in the context of poverty and crime (poverty is not a new phenomenon in Black South African communities).

• However, during that time, masses of young people that were linked to the larger resistance movement did not succumb to this situation.

• Organized by their youth leaders, who were in turn supported by adults, young South Africans became significant agents of social transformation, and made history as we know it today.

• Therefore, the South African situation is a good example of how young people in their interaction with their environment can actually change the environment they live in, instead of them being changed by the environment.

Theoretical reflections

• Theories of ‘child’ development postulate on how the negative environment (like the rural and township environments I alluded to above) can have negative effects on the developing child.

• However, Van Greunen (1993)\(^5\) has another view that, while we recognize the importance of the environment in the development of the child, we should guard against overemphasizing the influence of the environmental factors

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because this could result in subjecting a human being to his or her environment. In this way, we would be “reducing the child or the developing human being to the status of a mere response to situational events.”

- According to this view, a developing child cannot be a victim of the environment, because the child is a human being and all human beings possess (within themselves) hereditary factors, which Van Greunen (1993) has termed the “genetically determined multipotentiality.” Such hereditary factors mean that the developing human being (child) interacts with the environment, and it is the nature of this interaction between the person and his or her environment that is a determinant of the outcome of development. In other words, it is not just the negative environment that makes a criminal, but it is how the individual has interacted with the environment that shapes the outcome of development.

- To conceptualize the idea of a relationship between the child and his or her environment, Van Greunen (1993) came up with the concepts of co-existentiality and co-essentiality. Co-existentiality means that the child and the environment are interdependent, inseparable and interwoven, and should both be present at the same time for the child’s development to occur because they need each other.

- The concept of co-essentiality implies the interrelatedness between the child and the environment, where there is interaction between the self-developing child and the environment.

- According to this postulate, the child is not passive but actively participates to change and affect his or her circumstances. He or she is also “simultaneously being changed and affected by the very same circumstances he or she is trying to change and affect” (Van Greunen, 1993). In this regard, the nature of the interaction between the child and their environment is important as it determines the outcome of the developing child.

- However, for this interaction to occur, the hereditary factors that Van Greunen (1993) speaks about, need to be properly actualised to enable the child to change his/her environment while she or he is also being changed by the very same environment.
- **Proper education** is one element or factor that mediates this interaction between the child and the environment.

- However, given the multitude of factors that affect young people in South Africa, education alone might not be the only solution.

- In many countries and many societies including African indigenous communities, peer support, peer education, peer mentoring and peer counseling has proved to be strong elements or factors that mediate the interaction between the developing young people and their environment.

**Repositioning youth and youth leadership**

- For successful peer led influence on young people, a strong youth leadership is critical in mobilising and directing the energy of young people, to change their own environment and determine their own lives.

- With all the intersecting social burdens that overwhelm our societies, particularly youth, we need all the energy that young people have, to deal with all these social issues.

- Therefore, the role of youth leadership is critical in mobilizing and directing that energy towards dealing with the social problems, particularly social problems that directly affect them.

- And, the Community Development Association (CDA) through its several programmes (such as, Masakhane Youth Leadership Course, Peer Support Structure Project of HIV/AIDS Associate, Arts and Culture, Debating, Sports, Bursaries, etc.), is providing this youth leadership. I sometimes, wonder if the CDA leadership realises the extent to which they are influencing their own lives as well as the lives of all the youth they interact with (in their different projects) towards positive outcomes, despite the depressing environments under which many of our young people live.

- However, youth leadership would only be strong if adults believe that before young people are citizens tomorrow, they are citizens today, and therefore they need to be fully incorporated into society. In other words, society needs
to reposition youth and youth leaders and support them, in taking full responsibility of shaping their lives and future.

- This does not mean that young people must just be added in societal structures of governance, but it means recognizing that the knowledge that young people have, their views and their voices are important and should thus be centred.
- The involvement of young people in dealing with social issues presents an opportunity for society.
- It is therefore important to encourage young people to devise strategies and interventions and locate these within the larger context of the surrounding society.
- With the substantive support from communities, government and other sectors, youth can mediate the negative effects of the South African context.

In conclusion, youth organisations like the CDA, which constantly and diligently work to deal specifically with social issues that affect young people need adult support. I therefore commend all academics and adults, who support the work of the CDA Group. I also want to encourage the CDA to keep up the good work that they are doing.

e-mail: Buthelezit10@ukzn.ac.za
Website: http://edstudies.ukzn.ac.za

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