Youth identity, belonging and citizenship: Strengthening our democratic future

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Young people in South Africa today have to contend with a brutal past,[1] and an uncertain future characterised by persistent poverty, inequality and violence. Both impact on their sense of belonging – their feeling part of a promised dream of freedom, having a valued identity to celebrate, and being afforded the opportunity to transition successfully into independent adulthood.

At the same time, young people are described, in national discourses, either as a "ticking time-bomb" frustrated by the state's repeated failures to provide young people with desirable prospects,[2] or as "an opportunity", since healthy, educated and employed young people could – due to their sheer numbers – offer South Africa a way out of adversity and into prosperity.

This essay explores youth identity, belonging and citizenship in South Africa, and is structured around four questions:

- How do young people exercise agency and craft their identities?
- Where do young people experience or seek belonging?
- How does belonging affect political engagement, citizenship and social cohesion?
- What is needed to enable a greater sense of belonging and self-determination?

In exploring these questions, we do not claim that youth is a singular identity. Young people's experiences of identity, belonging and citizenship are inextricably shaped by race, class, gender, sexuality, religious beliefs and other socio-structural factors.[3] Previous essays have clearly illustrated the vulnerabilities of young people's lives. They suffer "wounded attachments"[4] to the past, and multiple exclusions[5] from the future. In this context young people's senses of identity, belonging and citizenship are formed, based upon:[6]

1. Personal agency and a sense of ownership; that is, the ability to exercise some form of control over one's financial, emotional and social circumstances;[7]
2. Structural support and appropriate bridging relationships[8] that connect individuals to families, peer groups, communities, and more formal institutions such as schools and the labour market; and
3. Identity-affirming rituals or traditions (such as circumcision, matriculating from school or obtaining a first job) that mark important milestones in life, build confidence, and offer opportunities for personal growth and performance[9].

These conditions matter for all individuals, but may be particularly important for young people as they transition into adulthood.

Where these conditions are present and enabling, young people are able to form secure attachments and a positive self-identity, which, in turn, facilitate healthy interpersonal relationships and productive participation in economic and educational domains. Conversely, where such conditions are absent, or disabling, notions of belonging, identity and citizenship are likely to be weak. Young people who are excluded from social, economic and emotional opportunities find themselves trapped in a cycle of poverty, and transmit this status, both materially and emotionally, to their children.

How do young people exercise agency and craft their identities?

The pre-conditions for a sense of belonging are largely absent in the rainbow nation. Mass structural unemployment, high rates of interpersonal violence, and fractured families and communities limit opportunities for young people to exercise personal agency and demonstrate their abilities in a positive self-affirming manner. More than half of the young people aged 18 – 24 are outside both the formal schooling system and the labour market, and live below a poverty line of R604 per month.[10] This persistent poverty and inequality prevents the realisation of full citizenship for young people in particular.[11] As a result, South Africa's youth are often seen as a problem needing to be solved. The negative stereotypes about youth, coupled with conservative adult views about young people's abilities and contribution to society, may further undermine young people's participation and feelings of inclusion.[12] These experiences are reflected in Tshekiso's story (see case 11 on p. 87).

One particularly persistent stereotype of young people born after 1994 is one that characterises them as "born free": they are supposedly born into better material, political and social conditions and the pathways to upward mobility are considered wide open to them. Yet, in reality, this new generation continues to experience the legacies of apartheid and stark physical and material deficits speak to "continuity rather than sharp generational change".[13] This is reflected in evidence on citizenship and political culture from the Afrobarometer surveys, which show no significant difference in the attitudes and behaviours of youth relative to older cohorts.[14]

As a response to these contradictions of post-apartheid South Africa, young people may seek new ways to express their identities and assert themselves *ikasi style*:[15] for some, that is in ways considered to be anti-social, including substance abuse, violence, and hyper-consumerism. Yet, at the same time, young people

remain remarkably optimistic about their prospects for upward mobility, and seemingly unable to acknowledge the structural violence[16] they experience on a daily basis. The contradiction between these high hopes and harsh barriers results in the "quiet violence of dreams" for many of South Africa's youth.[17]

Where do young people experience or seek belonging?

Structural support and appropriate bridging relationships are critical in helping young people develop a sense of belonging; yet these are consistently undermined for young people today. A family is the first site of belonging for most individuals – an institution that potentially supports secure attachment and positive self-identity. However, with high rates of orphanhood and physically absent parents, many young people may experience a lack of belonging in the early years. As shown in the essay on p. 69, only 35% of children under the age of 18 live with both parents.[18] The rest live mostly with their mothers only, while relatively few live with their fathers or extended family members. The disruption of family care, especially at a young age, has important psychosocial effects. For example, children without secure attachment are more prone to behavioural problems such as aggression, learning difficulties, poor language development and weak decision-making abilities, and are less resilient to poverty.[19] These, in turn, affect prospects for social mobility later on.

Boys, in particular, tend to under-perform at school, and are less likely to overcome this educational disadvantage later in life and progress in their chosen career paths. The disruption of family care also undermines the role that traditional rituals (such as circumcision) and other family-based events (holidays, religious events, birthdays) might play in identity formation. When the family disintegrates, young people may leave the home, living either permanently or temporarily on the streets, which increases their exposure to criminal activities.

Thus, young people are often left to create their own spaces for expressing their identity and to forge their own meanings of belonging. Without guidance and with time on their hands, they will invent their own rites of passage and seek out role models who may provide bridging relationships.[20] Typical positive trajectories would include participation in sport or cultural activities, civic life (such as volunteer organisations), and even political organisations.[i] Conversely, young people may seek out negative role models and join gangs that, through their hierarchical structure, strong identity and access to resources may serve young people's need for structure, connection, protection, excitement and access to material resources.[21]

These trajectories will, in turn, affect the formation and structure of the next generation of families, as the lack of strong attachment and identity is transferred from parent to child in the context of material deprivation (see parenting essay on p. 69). In addition, the disconnection of the majority of youth from social institutions such as labour markets, educational opportunities and even cultural heritage means that many of the "traditional" rituals that signal the transition to adulthood are absent, for example, successful matriculation or entering the labour force and finding a first job. Moreover, in the face of severe competition for scarce opportunities, incentives and opportunities for youth may have been taken by adults.[22]

Despite these stark economic and social challenges, more recent studies argue that South Africa's youth display a remarkable sense of optimism and independence, and a deep desire to assert their agency in order to escape their dire material circumstances.[23] However, in the absence of opportunities to participate fully as active citizens, this may manifest as a tendency towards individualism and consumerism where youth seek satisfaction through the consumption of "demonstrable" goods: what you wear, listen to, and know about through money.[24] This is most vividly demonstrated through I'khothane[ii], but is also evident in the way that youth creatively use and adapt new forms of media, such as Facebook and Twitter, to construct their identities.[25]

The various ways in which youth consume and use digital technologies such as mobile phones (p. 12) speak to questions of identity and power. When youth are recognised as the inheritors of a fast-approaching future, it gives them a sense of identity and purpose as responsible citizens. Conversely, in a free-market economy, youth may simply be reduced to consumers of material goods where an interest in political life gives way to the politics of consumption.[26] Here youth who are often unemployed or underemployed start to experience anxiety, frustration, loneliness, despair and depression, and hyper-individualism, all of which relate to a breakdown in support networks and social relations.[27]

How does belonging affect political engagement, citizenship and social cohesion?
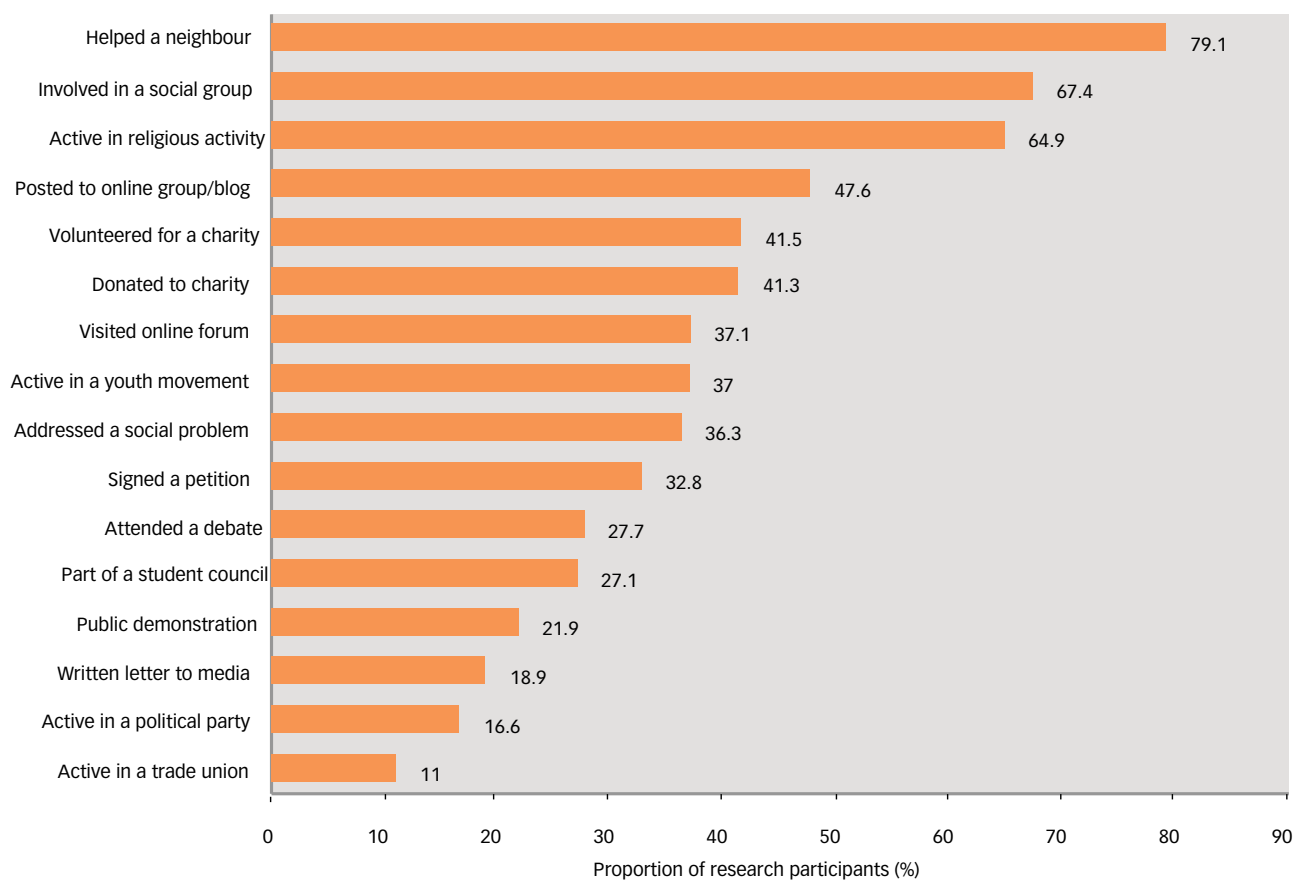
The colonial and apartheid eras were obsessed with racial classification and exclusion, while the post-apartheid state has used the concept of a "rainbow nation" to promote social cohesion and a common South African identity. Yet for many young people, the rainbow nation is neither an aspiration nor a reality. Studies of the "Born Frees" have pointed at their alienation from democratic culture.[28] This is characterised by low levels of participation in democratic institutions, low voter turnout and low levels of interest in political activities or topics.[29] Considerably fewer than 60% of eligible 18 – 29-year-olds registered to vote in 2014, a registration rate far lower than for older cohorts.[30] Moreover, amongst the youngest cohort aged 18 – 19, only a third of eligible voters registered.[iii] This lack of participation is echoed in their reportedly low levels of trust in politicians, political parties and local government.[31]

Yet, even here there is an apparent contradiction. The Afrobarometer suggests that youth are as likely to embrace a

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i   Student mobilisation, organisation and politicisation at the University of Cape Town under the banner of the ""Rhodes Must Fall" movement is a case in point.
ii I'khothane is a youth subculture characterised by the visible and often excessive consumption of expensive clothing and other consumer goods, followed by the very public and deliberate destruction of these goods in performances known as "battles".

Figure 21: Civic engagement amongst youth (18 – 29 years), 2012

Activity	Proportion (%)
Helped a neighbour	79.1
Involved in a social group	67.4
Active in religious activity	64.9
Posted to online group/blog	47.6
Volunteered for a charity	41.5
Donated to charity	41.3
Visited online forum	37.1
Active in a youth movement	37
Addressed a social problem	36.3
Signed a petition	32.8
Attended a debate	27.7
Part of a student council	27.1
Public demonstration	21.9
Written letter to media	18.9
Active in a political party	16.6
Active in a trade union	11

Proportion of research participants (%)

strong national identity as older age groups, and that their notions of citizenship mirror those of the previous generation. Despite their lack of involvement in formal political activities, youth have been at the forefront of many of the recent protest actions in South Africa over education reform[32] and emerging movements seeking to shift structural and systemic oppression such as "Rhodes Must Fall".[33]

Moreover, the high level of youth engagement in the drafting of the National Youth Policy 2015 – 2020[34] demonstrates that young people will mobilise, and do so en masse and to great effect, over issues that affect their lives, when they are provided with a genuine platform from which to express their views. Thus, while young people are alienated from contemporary South African democratic political culture, they are not singularly apathetic – and seek mechanisms and avenues to express their dissatisfaction outside of formal institutions.[35] This reflects their growing discontent with more formal structures that have failed to provide adequate platforms for them to engage as legitimate, respected decision-makers and make their voices heard.[36]

One should therefore not confuse young people's dissatisfaction with the public service with a lack of social or civic engagement, or with a lack of optimism and independence. Youth dissatisfaction with public service typically reflects national sentiment, and is not symptomatic of youth alone.[37] There is evidence to suggest that South Africa's youth are socially and civically engaged, albeit in less formally organised activities than prior generations may have been. Figure 21 illustrates that while involvement in political activities may be low, a large number of young people report offering assistance to neighbours, active involvement in social or religious groups, engagement with social media, and volunteer work, many of which require considerable time commitments.

How can a greater sense of belonging be built amongst young people in South Africa?

I grew up frustrated by the fact that we were constantly left out of decisions affecting our lives. I became angry and cynical about so-called "development plans". I was determined that one day I would find a way for the voice of my community to be heard… If young people could just see a little further over the horizon, it would give them a sense of hope and imminent possibility. If we feel connected to something bigger than ourselves, we have more incentive to study harder and keep away from harm. [38]

iii   Registered voters between the ages of 18 and 29 years accounted for a quarter of all registered voters. However, turnout data disaggregated by age have not yet been released by the Independent Electoral Commission, making it difficult to assess the extent of youth voter turnout.

Despite the important role that youth have played in the social and political transformation of South Africa, a traditionally welfarist approach to child and youth service delivery has failed to recognise youth as stakeholders who should be consulted in the policy-making process.[39] In contrast, a developmental approach would explicitly recognise the agency of youth and incorporate them as legitimate stakeholders with equal voice. The current emphasis on promoting "active" and/or "global" citizenship within education systems globally is based on two assumptions: Firstly, it assumes that youth are citizens-in-waiting in need of preparation and education to take up this role; and secondly, that there exists "good" and "bad" citizenship – and more often than not, it assumes that youth are usually "bad" citizens. Consider the inclusion in the National Youth Policy 2015 – 2020 of a recommendation that:

All young people must familiarise themselves with the Constitution and … live the Bill of Responsibilities … which … urges young people to "accept the call to responsibility that comes with the many rights and freedoms that they have been privileged to inherit from the sacrifice and suffering of those who came before".[40]

The policy also emphasises narrow patriotism and engagement with national symbols as a key to youth development:

Young people must take pride in learning and internalising the Preamble to the Constitution, because it (the Preamble) embodies what it means to be South African. Young people must agitate … that the Preamble to the Constitution is recited in all school gatherings, followed by the solemn singing of the National Anthem.[41]

Take youth agency seriously

The positioning of young people as needing to be grateful to their elders, and as needing to learn their responsibilities and become good patriotic citizens, is condescending. This rhetoric must change if youth are to be supported to use their agency and power effectively. Moreover, the empowerment of young people must also recognise and address the ways in which the marginalisation of adults and young people are interlinked in the context of fierce competition for scarce opportunities.

Those who hold political power as custodians of South Africa's democratic future must, in the first instance, take the issue of "youth belonging" seriously. Political involvement will only become attractive for youth when they see their needs and aspirations genuinely represented in political processes. This requires looking beyond whether youth are exercising their political right to vote, and includes questioning the extent to which youth concerns are actively articulated within the political mainstream. Belonging also requires that youth are granted the power to influence how their needs, fears, hopes, frustrations and aspirations are represented in local, provincial and national politics.

The involvement of youth as key stakeholders in the debates over the National Youth Policy 2015 – 2020 is a small step in the right direction. This agency must be deliberately and systematically

fostered. Encouraging voluntarism on its own (such as in a national youth service) is an important source of social capital, but it should not be equated with agency. Rather, it is important to invest in public-minded citizens – "growing their literacy to live in a civil society, their competence to participate in democratic communities, the ability to think critically and act deliberately in a pluralist world, the empathy to accommodate others".[42] Unlike long-term interventions like universal education, this kind of social capital can be built up in a relatively short period of time.[43]

Provide support and bridging relationships

New connections are vital. It is almost impossible for a young person without social connections to get access to finance or to meet a person of influence in the sector in which they work. If we are to create a culture of innovation, we have to open up our social systems and develop connections across race and class.[44]

Adults' recognition of youth as legitimate decision-makers with equal status is only a first step. In addition, it is important to provide appropriate bridging relationships or structural support to enable youth to access resources and opportunities and to exercise personal agency. This may take the form of meaningful incentives: either material support, such as the youth wage subsidy, or the provision of income maintenance for young people,[45] or skills development and public recognition[46]. In addition, young people may benefit from programmes that raise their critical awareness of the intergenerational persistence of material, social and emotional conditions, and the ways in which these conditions affect their current context and lives. Providing appropriate career and life guidance through trusted role models, and revising curricula to deal with these issues is key.

Examples include the Activate! Change Drivers Network, launched in 2012, which consists of just over 1,500 young leaders who are envisioning a new approach to social activism – building innovative local solutions to the critical challenges their communities face, and connecting nationally to amplify their impact. Core to the Activate! programme is an emphasis on building a new identity for the public good that bridges the poles of South African society through deep relationships, a common identity (being an "Activator") and semi-structured, ongoing support. The combination of relational and structural support is critical to the success of the programme.

Use media as a platform that empowers youth

Media-based programmes are also important in giving young people a sense of social and cultural power and identity. One such initiative is Live Mag, a social enterprise where young people are up-skilled in journalism and media skills through producing a nationally distributed youth-focused magazine. The power of Live Mag rests not only in the skills young people develop, but in creating a space for them to define and position themselves in relation to both emerging consumer and celebrity trends, and socio-political issues. Their Voting Is Power (#VIPSA) campaign

Case 11: Tshekiso's story – Youth longing to belong

I decided I would definitely be a "somebody" in life, and thought that becoming a gangster would give me the self-esteem I wanted so badly. I was 10 years old when I joined that gang. But now I'm part of another gang: Activate! It brings together young leaders across South Africa, building their sense of identity, belonging and common purpose. That purpose is to make our country a better place. There are so many other young people out there just like me. Our smouldering anger has few outlets. Lately, several politicians have taken to calling us a "ticking time bomb". They mean well, but they need to understand that the implied threat gives us a perverse sense of power in the same way that gangs hold sway through menace. Please stop defining us in terms of deficit and destructive risk. It feeds our pessimism. It traps us in the prisons of our minds. Actually, I'm still motivated by the same basic instincts that caused me to join the gang. I want to belong, to know who I am and to feel that I have a purpose. It was that desire that caused me to join loveLife in the same way as I had joined the B.D.C. gang a decade before. My material condition has not changed much, but I now have some power to respond differently to life… Many young South Africans are still looking for a new identity. They don't want to be defined as heirs of apartheid, but as shapers of the future….Defining that new identity starts with us, but if older people want to help, they should change the way they talk about us.

Source: Molohlanyi T (2012) Youth longing to belong. *Sunday Times Review*, 3 June 2012: 1

uses the tools of social media and consumer marketing to engage young people around their power as voters. A similar initiative in the media space is the Children's Radio Foundation, which works with young teenage reporters to stimulate conversations around youth issues on community radio.

Support through dedicated youth programmes

Many other youth programmes represent concrete examples that deliver youth-focused skills development, whilst at the same time providing bridging relationships into economic and social opportunities. Some of the early evidence in an external evaluation of Activate! shows that Activators demonstrate greater social cooperation in solving a collective dilemma than a control group, and are also significantly more likely to report playing a leadership role in a volunteer or civic organisation. There have also been positive effects on Activators' employment expectations and job-seeking behaviour.[47]

A survey of self-reported outcomes of the loveLife groundBREAKERS programme showed very positive differences between groundBREAKERS and their same-age counterparts, although the study methodology did not account for selection bias. The study showed that nearly 50% of groundBREAKER graduates achieved some level of post-matric qualification (against only 6% of their same-age counterparts), 60% of groundBREAKERS were employed (compared to only 36% of their counterparts), and two-thirds of groundBREAKERS who were still involved in community organisations held leadership positions.[48] This emerging evidence makes a strong case for the positive effects of "soft skills" interventions that focus on citizenship, identity and belonging, even on hard outcomes such as employment.

Government has, and continues to place, a lot of stock in National Youth Service programmes as their primary youth development intervention. Programmes such as the National Rural Youth Service programme (NARYSEC) and the YouthBuild programme have been rolled out[iv] to over 15,000 young people.[49] However, NARYSEC[v], which is the largest youth development programme in government,[50] has come under fire for its low wages and the fact that the 48-month-long programme does not provide certification to facilitate access to the labour market.[51] Interestingly, NARYSEC is not mentioned within the National Youth Policy 2015 – 2020, despite being the largest youth service programme. Importantly, there are no comprehensive impact evaluations of any of these government programmes, so it is unclear whether they provide the personal development, bridging relationships, or opportunities that they are intended to.

Strengthen the National Youth Policy

The following recommendations may be useful in strengthening the National Youth Policy 2015 – 2020 in order to build youth identity, belonging and citizenship:

- Strengthen support for sporting and cultural activities by building more effective and responsive funding mechanisms at local and provincial levels, or through specific agencies. In addition, city planners and local governments should explore mechanisms to ensure access to facilities for all young people, which can be used for both recreation and identity-building (as is the case with, for example, Amandla EduFootball). This includes removing or reducing fees for the use of community halls, which currently exclude the majority of marginalised young people from these spaces.
- Move away from nation-building through "patriotic" rhetoric (such as repeating the Preamble of the Constitution), and build real citizenship competencies, including knowledge of how the various levels of government work and the electoral system, and build an expectation of high-quality service with the knowledge of how to navigate socio-political systems.
- Support at a much larger scale the youth development efforts of civil society organisations that are able to innovate and respond

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iv   This is an estimate based on a report in 2013 that 12,881 participants were enrolled in NARYSEC at that point.
v   NARYSEC's annual budget is roughly R550 million – far exceeding the total NYDA annual budget of just under R400million.

to the particular needs of young people in their contexts. At present, there are almost no mechanisms though which government systematically funds youth development through civil society organisations.

- Review the implementation of the National Youth Service and NARYSEC programmes to ensure that they focus on bridging relationships into labour markets or higher education, alongside identity-building.

In order to build a greater sense of belonging for South Africa's youth, there is a need to improve the quality of their experiences across the board: how they are parented; their educational experiences; their experience of health and health care services; and their access to the material conditions that enable a sense of real and imminent possibility in life. But there are also quick wins which can have some immediate effects – programmes that build a sense of collective identity to overcome isolation, that build a real sense of capacity and power, that support young people to craft their own narratives, that provide rituals and affirmation, and that also form bridging relationships into further opportunities. If these programmes also support young people to "knock-on" their agency to their peers, South Africa may well be able to build a real sense of power and hope embedded in real prospects for upward mobility among its youth.

Case 12: The impact of mobile phones on youth in South Africa

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Although only a quarter of South African households have access to the internet in their homes, mobile technology has drastically expanded this access.[53] Nine out of every 10 South African households own a cellphone,[53] and many urban and rural households access the internet via mobile phones. National survey data indicate that young people aged 15 – 24 account for nearly 72% of mobile ownership.[54]

These figures show the potential of mobile phone technology to support youth in their development, and in their search for opportunities. Yet, despite widespread usage among young people, little is known about how mobile phone technology impacts on their lives. Drawing on qualitative and quantitative data collected from 1,500 young people[i] in South Africa[ii], this case documents the ways in which mobile phone use impacts both positively and negatively on youth.[55]

The research provides evidence of the creative ways youth engage with mobile technology to access information on education, health care and economic and employment opportunities. Yet, alongside these benefits, there is evidence of significant threats and risks related to mobile phone use. In addition, the research highlights the role of mobile phones in the development of young people's identity and sense of belonging.

How do mobile phones impact positively on young people?

Mobile phones have become an integral part of daily life for many young people in South Africa. This is partly due to the availability of low-cost phones, prepaid subscriptions, prepaid airtime in low denominations and free off-peak minutes.[56] Some service providers or products also offer contract options that give young people cheap or free ways to communicate and access the internet.

The study showed that mobile phones make it easier to maintain communication with family and friends, and those who may have moved away in search of work. They allow for an easier flow of resources – for example, when money is transferred electronically between family members. Knowledge and information are passed on or are more easily accessed, and local and global networks open up to young people who otherwise would not have access. Mobile phones are also used by youth to call for help in health-related emergencies, relay urgent news, organise transport, plan social activities or simply ask for funds from parents or older siblings. The study showed that 61% of learners used a cell phone to ask someone

for school fees or associated expenses such as a uniform and lunch in the 12 months prior to the study.

Mobile phones have also taken on a central role in education, job search and livelihood support. Learners reported using their phones to search the internet for help with their homework and many use Mxit and WhatsApp to discuss homework with friends and organise study groups. In the survey, 48% of young people who were enrolled and regularly attending school said they used a cell phone to get information or other help with school work in the week prior to the survey. This included both contacting friends and others for assistance with schoolwork, and browsing the internet to find help with schoolwork.

> *I am using the cell phone to Google search for information at school, also … Facebook … sites … such as … Master maths [where] you [can] request an answer for any mathematics-related question.* (16-year-old female, Eastern Cape)

Older youth reported using their mobile phones as valuable tools in their livelihood strategies. They relied on their mobile phones to conduct job searches, build networks, contact potential employers and even organise their small businesses. Owning a cell phone means being contactable by employers and having the power to manage one's resource networks.

> *I check the internet once a week for any vacancies. If I find a vacancy, even if it has passed, I make phone contact… I call the numbers [and] I normally ask the person if I can send my CV so that he or she can have a look into it. I also contact these people to check if they can tell me about the times when they have vacancies.* (25-year-old female, Gauteng/North West province)

Occasionally young people reported being engaged in phone-related employment such as selling airtime or mobile phone accessories. Of the 298 15 – 25-year-olds not enrolled in any form of education at the time of the study, 46% reported using their phones for job search in the 12 months prior to the survey.

> *I sell airtime for all networks … I also sell and register sim cards [as required by the Regulation of Interception of Communication Act - RICA]. I sell electricity over the phone … I charge R6 for R5 airtime so I earn a R1 profit … I have recently started this business [so] I don't have much experience as to how much profit I make.* (21-year-old man, who also sells fruit, biscuits etc., Eastern Cape)

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i   Young people were between the ages of 9 to 25, with 893 aged 15 – 25.
ii This project was part of a larger three country study (Ghana, Malawi and South Africa) on the usage of mobile phone technology among young people. The study was conducted by Durham University (see www.dur.ac.uk/child.phones/).

How do mobile phones inform young people's identity and sense of belonging?

The role of mobile phones in young people's lives can perhaps best be understood in terms identity formation and belonging. Social network sites are an important way for young people to stay connected to friends, family and broader social communities. Mobile phone have become status symbols and provide youth with a sense of belonging to their peer group.[57]

> *[Without a smart phone] I feel I am missing out a lot …*
> *I feel left out and it hurts me …* (16-year-old woman, Eastern Cape)

> *I asked for a Blackberry because it made me a recognised person to my peers.* (20-year-old man, Eastern Cape)

Yet, mobile phones also create new social hierarchies of inclusion and exclusion alongside immense social pressure. Not having a technologically advanced phone leads to low self-esteem and even bullying parents into buying expensive phones to fit in.

What are the risks associated with mobile phone use among young people?

Mobile phones can be highly beneficial but their downside in schools and elsewhere is becoming increasingly apparent: 70% of learners reported negative impacts on their schoolwork. Academic performance was affected by disrupted classes due to learner and teacher calls – a massive 90% of learners reported teachers using phones during lesson time, and it is highly unlikely that the majority of these calls were directly relevant to their professional practice.

Further, learners mentioned disruptions in their sleep patterns associated with cheap night calls; time lost through prolonged sessions on social network sites; and increasingly widespread access to pornography, even in some primary schools.

A UNICEF study found that 42% of young people in South Africa talk to strangers on Mxit every day and 33% do so at least once a week.[58] But the internet is a largely un-policed environment where anyone can upload information about themselves – authentic or not.[59] By developing virtual relationships with strangers, youth are at risk of becoming victims of online crimes and violence during potential face-to-face meetings.

Learners also mentioned cyberbullying (mainly via voice calls) as a particularly large threat, affecting the young girls in the study more than their male peers.[60] Young girls are also particularly at risk of sexual harassment and exploitation by men who manage to get hold of their numbers, including their male teachers.

As ardent users of mobile phones, youth need to be made aware of the dangers that come with access to mobile technology. The following section addresses areas for consideration in helping youth navigate the digital environment.

What are the potential opportunities for intervention?

It is clear that the expanded use of mobile phone technology offers huge potential for supporting young people in the context of education, livelihoods and identity creation. Mobile phones can substantially expand learning opportunities by enabling access to information directly relevant to the curriculum, but also by helping learners to explore their identity and potential. The transformative potential of this technology for young lives is exciting but still uncertain and its support requires careful consideration by government departments, schools, caregivers, communities and network providers, in addition to youth themselves.

At present, most parents either remain largely unaware of their children's online activities, or they do not understand how to help them use the internet safely and responsibly. Schools are well placed to teach children about online safety but may need to rethink and streamline their current approach. Although many schools have cell phone policies in place, these vary from school to school, do not always deal with the issue of internet safety, and are often inconsistent. Many are, for example, highly restrictive towards learners, thereby prohibiting lessons about responsible usage – but not to teachers, an issue that needs urgent attention.

In South Africa there are currently very few formal initiatives to address the online threats faced by youth. The Department of Basic Education has drawn up guidelines on e-Safety in Schools[61] but this has yet to be implemented or integrated into current school curricula. It would benefit youth to focus on safe and responsible online behavior rather than restrict or banning usage all together. Given the significant extent to which peer pressure defines how youth engage with mobile technology, it is important to involve young people in the process of finding solutions. This includes creating opportunities for open and frank discussion – in families, schools, community fora and the media – so that young people are able to make informed choices and develop effective strategies to navigate the risks and benefits associated with new technologies.

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