Introduction

Around the world, millions of dollars have been channeled towards creating opportunities to engage youth in community life, yet millions remain disengaged, not in employment, education, or training (NEET) (1). Success in this endeavor has not been remarkable on the whole as close to 75 million young people (6% of all 15–24 year olds) are unemployed worldwide (2). In South Africa alone, 36.1% of youth ages 15 and 35 years were unemployed according to the June 2014 labor force survey (3). Despite progress institutionalizing youth development, pre-apartheid concerns of youth disengagement, unemployment, family and community disintegration (4), have persisted in the post-apartheid era (5,6). The post-apartheid era has continued to witness high rates of grade repetition, school drop-out, unsuccessful or prolonged school to work transitions, and low participation rates in further education, particularly among black and colored youth (5,7). Youth who fail to complete education or make successful transitions from school/training to work are at risk of economic marginalization, community disengagement, and poor health status (5). Studies suggest that disengaged youth are less self-reliant, lack a sense of purpose, and indulge in activities that are detrimental to their health (8,9). Young people who disengage from education early are almost four times more likely to report poor health, have mortality rates up to nine times higher than
the general population and are more likely to require welfare support and government subsidized services (10). Beyond the individual outcomes such as lower earnings, poor physical and mental health, and weak marital prospects, adverse effects to society include excessive health care costs, higher rates of unemployment, and extreme crime prevention related costs (11,12). Given the anticipated population growth, the growing rate of youth disengagement, and the continued rural–urban migration pattern; understanding community leadership practice and youth engagement can aid the development of interventions that can improve individual and community health and wellbeing.

We define youth engagement as the participation of youth in responsible activities that impact themselves and others. These activities can be in the form of family, school, training, work or community participation (13). Creating opportunities for youth participation in these environments is therefore foundational towards promoting sustainable youth engagement (14). For instance, engaging youth in family decision-making processes creates a sense of participation that can improve self-esteem, responsibility, and social behaviors (15). In addition, schools that facilitate teacher-student-community triad engagement further strengthen these traits and achieve better academic outcomes (16). At the community level, civic engagement is nurtured when youth take on organizational and/or community leadership roles (17,18). Despite growing evidence on the benefits of youth engagement, youth, particularly those in rural communities, remain largely isolated from mainstream community activities (14). For example, in rural South Africa, many poor households continue to rely on diverse livelihood activities such as agrarian, cash transfers, small-scale informal economic activities, and patterns of mutuality and social reciprocity to meet their basic needs (19). Young people may find these rural forms of livelihood unattractive. Thus, these communities are less able to prepare and engage youth in today’s contemporary society where formal employment is a key factor in the transition from youth to adulthood and from dependence to independence (12). However, within the context of youth engagement and development, youth-adult partnerships have increasingly become a phenomenon of interest. Youth-adult partnerships are conceptualized as both a developmental process and a community practice that brings people across generations to work together in creating a shared community vision and collaboratively address community concerns (17,20). Through sharing perspectives, experiences and networks, intergenerational partnerships can stimulate skill development, participatory inquiry and collective action among youth and adults (21); and can be an ideal strategy in communities with high youth disengagement.

Drawing on qualitative data, this study explored perceptions of rural South Africa community leaders on community leadership and youth engagement. Little research has been done to examine the challenges to and facilitators of youth engagement from the viewpoint of community leaders in international settings. We use ‘community leader’ loosely to mean a person who works with others to develop and sustain the wellbeing of the community. In practice, this implies that community leaders perform different roles such as facilitator, supporter, collaborator, and empowerer of local community members (22). Data are being collected in rural South Africa and rural Missouri (USA) in three phases: qualitative exploratory phase, quantitative phase, and intervention phase. However, this manuscript reports on part of the findings from the exploratory phase in rural South Africa. The specific aims of this phase of the study were to: (a) assess community leader’s understanding of community leadership, (b) assess current behaviors among youth, (c) identify current barriers to youth inclusion and advancement in community activities, and (d) examine opportunities and potential interventions for promoting the involvement of young people in community life. The second phase focuses on youth and examines the extent to which contextual (interpersonal, organizational and community) factors influence youth engagement in community leadership and health promoting activities. In the third phase, we will describe recommendations for community leaders to promote youth engagement and health promotion. In this phase, research-based and culture sensitive interventions will be developed and implemented in collaboration with community leaders.

Method

Research site

For the purposes of this study, the target population was rural community leaders in a community in the Theewaterskloof Municipality
of the Western Cape province of South Africa. The population of the community was 5663, of which 94% were Coloreds and 3% Blacks – constituting two of the disproportionately affected populations in South Africa. The community is poor with only one public primary school, one high school, a public library, churches, and one primary health care clinic. Seventy-four percent of the population have no access to internet, 28% have no piped water inside their houses, and 68% live on an average monthly income of R3200 ($250.00). Youth unemployment rate for the municipality was 25% in 2014 (23). Alcohol and drug abuse are major challenges among the youth in the community of study.

Sample and data collection

Research participants were selected using a mix of convenience and purposive, including snowball sampling, with attention to how they could purposefully inform an understanding of the research problem (24), and representativeness according to ethnicity, gender and age. Our Western Cape University community resident representative identified people considered to be community leaders. The inclusion criterion were being: 18 years or older, a resident in the community for three or more years, perceived as a leader by the Western Cape representative, and available and willing to be interviewed. We used the South Africa’s 1996 National Youth Act definition of youth as those between 14–35 years (3) but only interviewed those 18 years and older. Following ethical approval from a Western Cape University Review Board, qualitative data were collected from 21 community leaders using semi-structured individual interviews and field notes. Participants comprised people working mostly with youth: church leaders (n = 1), school administrators (n = 4), teachers (n = 1), library workers (n = 3), community organization directors (CODs; n = 7); elected officials (n = 1), youth forum leaders (n = 1), and unemployed community leaders (n = 3). Of the 21, three were employed youth under 35 years. Participants’ socio-demographic information is presented in Table 1.

Interview questions were formulated in two stages. First, questions were compiled by the research team based on the literature review, research questions, and research method. In the second stage, representative community leaders were consulted to assess whether the questions would address the purpose of the study, if questions were understandable and contextually appropriate. During interviews, open-ended questions and probes were used to discover participants’ experiences around the topic of interest. Examples of questions include: ‘Thinking of the health of community members, what are some of the community activities/events that happen here towards promoting the health of community members? Could you explain how the youth are involved in these activities? What are the barriers they face? What has been the role of community leaders in engaging the youth?’

All interviews were conducted by one researcher (first author) at places mutually agreed upon with participants, such as participants’ homes or workplaces. The researcher provided information on the goals, benefits and potential risks associated with participation to all potential participants. Informed written consent was obtained prior to data collection and all interviews were audio-recorded. The researcher was a black African male with experience growing up poor in a rural setting in Southern Africa. The researcher attended community activities to observe different contextual elements related to the study while building trust with participants. Interviews lasted 45 minutes on average, and data collection continued until data saturation was attained. Individual interviewing and the recruitment of new participants stopped when there was redundancy of information (25).

Data analysis

An experienced transcriber transcribed all the interviews verbatim. Researchers used content analysis to analyze interview data and interpret findings (26). When conducting exploratory work in a new area, content analysis may be appropriate for reporting common issues mentioned in data. Since there are no previous studies dealing with the perceptions of rural community leaders in South Africa on community leadership and youth engagement, the coded categories were derived directly from the text data (27).

Content analysis was done in three steps. First, preliminary analysis involved familiarization with the content of the data. Two researchers compared
five audio recordings to transcripts to ensure accuracy. Second, the two researchers analyzed the same five transcripts together and developed and compared codes and notes thereby formulating a general description of the research topic (28). Following this process, the two researchers independently coded the rest of the transcripts and one entered coded transcripts into NVivo for in-depth analysis. Finally, the same researchers compared material within categories to discover variations in and connections between themes to ensure coherence (29). Independent coding and peer debriefing enhanced the trustworthiness of the findings. Concepts of what rural South African community leaders perceived as being significant and important in community leadership and youth engagement emerged.

### Results

The primary objective of this study was to explore experiences of a rural South African community on community leadership and youth engagement. Participants indicated that most youth in their community were disengaged; and that community leadership needed to play a more effective role in creating opportunities to engage the youth in leadership and health promoting
behaviors. Data analysis revealed the following domains: conceptualizations of leadership, current youth behaviors, barriers to youth engagement, youth leadership opportunities, and potential solutions. Sample quotes were used to substantiate each theme.

**Domain 1: Conceptualizations of leadership**

Research participants had a clear understanding of some of the key components of community leadership such as visionary and inclusive, volunteerism, and role modeling.

**Visionary and inclusive**

Participants believed that leadership is a multidimensional and inclusive process in which leaders are visionary, focused and hardworking people ‘involved (not only) in the problems(...) but also in the happiness of people in surrounding areas.’ (Church leader). Along the same vein, another participant said,

I see (a leader) as somebody who must take leadership in such a manner that he must come and he must take the people with him, put right plans on the table so that the community can be uplifted. But community leadership, mustn’t be one person(...) you must have, out of the different organizations, leaders to put the plan together, and take everything forward. (Unemployed Community Leader)

According to most participants, community leadership was also inclusive. The general perception was that the more diverse community leadership is, the more cooperation there will be among residents and the easier it becomes to address a variety of community issues including youth disengagement.

**Volunteerism**

Most participants felt that in addition to having a vision for the community, community leaders must volunteer their time to serve the community. Volunteers commit time, energy, and expertise to the community tasks at hand. One participant elaborated:

When you do community work, it’s for free(...) these people (community leaders) have their homes, their lives, their jobs, and outside of that, they still step up and say I’ll do this for the community,(...) I look up to these people, because they take their own time and they give back to the community. (Teacher)

**Role modeling**

Participants, especially school leaders who played an important role in the educational and moral development of youth, additionally emphasized role modeling as a key trait for community leadership.

(...the way you live, in the school and outside of the school, you must stand out as someone that people can look up to (...). So we as a staff, we must live up to a high standard, so that the children can see. (School Administrator 1)

**Domain 2: Current youth behaviors**

Several remarks were made to accentuate the disengagement of youth in the community. Almost all participants buttressed this with their experiences on the growing concern over the number of youth NEET who increasingly indulge in drug and alcohol abuse; and irresponsible sexual activities. Participants expressed concern about the lack of after school supervision and inadequate resources in the community to care for young people when not in school.

(...)from past two in the afternoon until when their parents come back, my learners will be on their own in this community(...) there’s a whole lot of things going on that you won’t believe, that say a 9-year-old, smoke marijuana, like it is free for them. They drink alcohol and heavier things because there is nobody looking after them. (School Administrator 2)

Sixty percent [of our students] are currently using drugs (...) and 80% of our learners experience drugs, one or another type. Most of our learners, because there is nothing in this community, tend to use alcohol from Friday to Sunday. (School Administrator 3)
Lack of after school opportunities does not only limit youth participation, it also puts them at risk of engaging in risky health behaviors. Keeping youth occupied in after school extracurricular activities that provide collaborative engagement can contribute to positive youth outcomes, and a reduction in risky behaviors (30).

**Domain 3: Barriers to youth engagement**

Use of drugs and alcohol and early sexual behaviors were identified as risk factors for youth disengagement. Participants felt that these risk factors stem from other upstream causes such as socio-economic status, changing societal norms, and lack of collaboration among key community stakeholders.

**Socio-economic status**

Poverty was seen as the underlying cause of youth disengagement and poor health. Participants expressed that young people from poor families were more disengaged and hence more likely to be involved in irresponsible sexual, drug, and alcohol use behaviors.

Poverty leads to people selling themselves, selling drugs for others, and also children. That is currently here at our school. (School Administrator 3)

Participants sensed that youths living in poverty are systematically prevented from accessing opportunities and resources that are normally available to others such as sporting activities or support networks, yet these activities are critical to their health, development and participation in community life. Once the disadvantaged youth withdraw from community life, they become hard to reach, as pointed out by one participant:

(...)the resources that we have, they (youth) don’t use them. Many a time I sent out that there are opportunities for young people to do this, I’ve acquired funding for this, please come and these were not job opportunities, opportunities to learn, but they don’t make use of it’. (COD 1)

**Changing societal norms**

Participants also mentioned that there is diminishing regard for youth discipline among members of the community. In their view, lack of discipline due to the influx of Western values and the perceived lack of concern by community members were fundamental reasons for the breakdown of law and order in the community.

But now you get some of the children coming in from other schools, and they’re not used to that discipline. So we have a system where they sit at detention in the afternoon, and that’s mainly all we can do. In the olden days, you can give him a hiding (…)but now you cannot do anything. If you look at what is going on in South Africa now, everyone is doing anything they want and they get away with it. (School Administrator 1)

Intergenerational divide between younger and older adults was also cited as a barrier to youth engagement. Research participants expressed that young adults perceived them as change averse, which does not encourage an influx of new ideas from the younger generation.

The senior people and the retired will volunteer in organizations, but then you have the problem of them not being open for change. So when you have a suggestion to make, as a younger person, they are not open to it. (COD 2)

Providing opportunities for youth to participate in decision-making processes in community settings can nurture some discipline and motivation to engage, which in turn, can help them develop positive social behaviors and role-taking skills (18).

**Lack of collaboration among key community stakeholders**

Engaging marginalized youth at various levels of community life presented a significant challenge for community leaders considering the prevalence of disconnect and distrust the youth often experience with their social environments. Several participants noted that there was a lack of shared community
youth engagement agenda as local organizations and residents do not address community issues collectively.

What I think the community leaders lack here is that they would rather work on their own than working together. For instance, this organization works separately and that organization works separately(…)If you pull together, there can be more done. (COD 2)

Some participants felt that youth community engagement was being stalled because community members remain shrouded by historical injustices associated with racial discrimination. This perception could result in the inability of older members of the community to cooperate and in the long run diminishes prospects of engaging the community in general and young people specifically.

The only way that we can improve leadership skills here is to deal with the issues of the past. The only way we can deal with the issues of the past is to work really hard to bring communities together. (…)Then you have an opportunity to be able to change people's perceptions and their minds on issues that affect the whole community. (COD 3)

Domain 4: Current opportunities and potential solutions

Meaningful youth engagement is a key concept not only for positive youth development, but also for systems change to more effectively support youth and families in poverty. Participants perceived that opening up the community to outside professionals who volunteer their skills and knowledge could improve youth engagement, development and health outcomes.

We need more programs, more people to come in and do skills development. For the children who are deep in drugs, I got hold of organizations in Cape Town(…)So they put learners and adults on a seven-week program where they teach them life skills(…) One of those learners is really standing out because he has used skills that he learned there and is participating in sport. (School Administrator 3)

This community needs more access to information. People who give talks about what alcohol abuse does to the community, the health of the children, teenage pregnancies, how can we talk to the young people to have responsible sexual encounters(…) (COD 2)

There are various facets of the community within which the youth could be involved, such as schools, churches, youth forums, non-governmental organizations (NGOs), and community organizations. Religion has a strong influence on the community and could be pivotal to youth engagement.

We had the leaders of the youth from the different churches and organizations, and we brought them together and I had like an information session so that they can know how to be a leader,(…) so that is going to be an ongoing thing. (Library Worker 1)

Another participant echoed:

The next step is to sustain their interest, invest in them with projects that can help in their educational development but also in their empowerment from the individual point of view and as a member of community(…) to become an instrument of change(…). (Youth Forum Leader)

Participants felt that adults in the community should collaborate and participate more in school developmental activities. According to this view, great potential to address youth disengagement lies in collaboration among the key stakeholders: family, schools, and local organizations. So I think the first priority is that parents, the school and then the businesses (…) can (collectively) help the children(…) (School Administrator 1)

Discussion

Although community leaders had different views of ‘leadership,’ they believed community leadership can play an important role in preventing youth
disengagement through ensuring that community programs both include and provide ongoing support for youth. Participants also felt that there was lack of trust between youth and adults. This reinforces the idea that local leadership should be characterized by shared power and flexibility, allowing young people to have a voice in the allocation of community resources (31). Adult community leaders acting as agents of change at the grassroots level should possess competencies necessary for creating opportunities for specific subgroups of youth based on gender and age. The literature on youth–adult partnerships emphasizes the importance of involving citizens across generations in community decision-making processes and events that affect their wellbeing (20). These relationships provide youth with access to information, assistance, support and encouragement, which can be useful in preparing the youth for adult life. Through working together to address common concerns, youth and adults can bring different perspectives, experiences and networks into the partnerships. More importantly, for youth poor in social capital, youth–adult collaborative activities can enhance feelings of belongingness to the community, thereby promoting health through civic participation (21). Participation shifts power from dominance by a few towards a social model that creates the conditions where people have greater control over their health and wellbeing (32).

Our observation that poverty erodes willingness to participate confirms earlier findings that poverty stricken areas provide fertile ground for isolation from mainstream social and economic systems (2,8). Youth with high-risk conditions such as poverty and alcohol and drug abusive behaviors tend to be more disconnected and typically lack trust in existing support systems (33). Study participants emphasized that creating economic and social engagement opportunities for youth and adults can reduce poverty and potentially minimize youth disengagement. This, however, requires community leaders that are proactive in identifying the challenges experienced by youth at all levels (family, school, and community) and creating ongoing support to overcome them.

Community leaders reported that evolving social norms, particularly erosion of family values, were contributing to increases in youth disengagement. Whereas some societies, like the US, debate about parental over-involvement (34), this South African rural community was concerned about under-involved parents. Driven by poverty, and the influx of Western values, many families lack social networks and are failing to invest enough resources, including time, required to shepherd youth through their early adulthood years. These factors coupled with changes in the labor market, such as acceptance of women, demand for more educated and skilled workers, less job opportunities, has meant more ‘time alone’ for NEET youth. Parents either work long hours on low paying jobs or are themselves disengaged from community life. Closely linked to the erosion of family values was the understanding among community leaders that ‘generational’ differences were also exacerbating youth disengagement. This observation reinforces the need for youth–adult partnerships that promote collaboration in both social and business activities. Research suggests that community initiatives that involve youth in governance, organizing, and activism can enhance youth development and civic engagement (17,18). No doubt, such collaborative efforts are possible only when both parties, adults and youth, commit to open, consistent and nonjudgmental communication with one another. Participation in community leadership partnerships that build some of these skills can be the first step towards promoting youth–adult collaborations. Youth engagement, even on a voluntary basis, can be a pathway to long-term societal engagement (17).

Finally, community organizations in resource-limited rural areas were perceived as providing services in isolation of one another. However, organizations working in partnership tend to create more opportunities for the breeding of innovative ideas that can increase youth participation (35). Thus, in rural areas, it is paramount that parents, schools and other organizations collaborate in creating opportunities for youth engagement and health promotion. For example, parents can participate in school activities and also make sure their children go to school prepared for educational activities. On the other hand, schools and community organizations can assist in the development of youth by understanding the contextual factors that influence youth’s engagement in family, school and community life; and seeking resources to address those needs.

Implications for practice

Given our findings on the perceptions of community leaders on community leadership and youth engagement, and the general research pointing
out how youth participation in family, school and community life influences their health (33), there is need to promote youth engagement through interventions targeting youth at all three levels: family, school and community.

• One potential approach would be to establish adult–youth cooperative businesses that tap into existing material and human capital. Community leaders skilled in specific fields like agriculture could educate and support young people to utilize available resources such as communal land to engage in commercial agriculture. Cooperatively shaping projects that affect community health and wellbeing can promote an understanding that individual resources, such as talents and networks, can be used to promote both individual and community wellbeing.

• Meaningful cross-sectional and interdisciplinary partnerships built on relationships that exhibit mutual trust among key stakeholders (schools, community and businesses) should be the main tenet of any community initiative aimed at promoting youth engagement and health. In rural South Africa, such inclusive partnerships can promote effective community visioning that eventually benefits youth and address the deep historical community injustices of racial discrimination through increasing participants’ understanding of the concepts of leadership and engagement; and how these are culturally-based (36,37).

Limitations

Future studies should include larger sample sizes of youth and use mixed methods to increase generalizability to other rural and resource-limited communities in South Africa. All participants in this study were over 30 years of age. Future research should include perspectives of a younger age group.

Conclusion

Findings from this in-depth qualitative study illustrated how community leaders conceptualize community leadership and the challenges faced when attempting to engage younger adults in activities. Community leadership was viewed as an inclusionary process driven by hardworking, visionary and focused community members. Participants identified poverty as a key contributing factor to youth disengagement. Other factors included changing family norms, lack of collaboration among key community leaders and organizations, and generational gap. Participants suggested potential solutions that can both strengthen community leadership and increase youth participation. This demonstrates the need for community development and health practitioners to tap on local knowledge when developing interventions to improve youth engagement and reduce risky health behaviors.

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Declaration of Conflicting Interests

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