

Ubuntu Dialogue: Addressing Apathy Towards Community Development Initiatives Among Youth of African Descent in Nova Scotia

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My experience in community development spans over two decades across Nigeria and Canada. Over the years, I have been deeply engaged in community development in Nova Scotia, particularly through a leadership role in program development for people of African descent in the province. My work directly impacts the lives of young people of African descent. While I have achieved considerable progress implementing over ten funded programs, my biggest challenge has been the lack of interest among the youth of African descent. This lack of interest or apathy is the backdrop of my research interest.

Problem Statement

The low participation rates among youth of African descent in enrolment in the skilled trades training programs in Nova Scotia pose a significant issue for community development practitioners. Despite ample resources for funding youth for skilled trades career training, there is a consistent lack of interest among the youth of Africa in enrolling in these programs. At the Africadian Empowerment Academy, where I serve as a community development practitioner, we manage over ten federally and provincially funded intervention programs to provide pathways to skilled trades. However, these programs have faced difficulties in recruiting youth of African descent over the past four years. Enrolling 20 participants in various cohort pathway programs has taken an average of more than four months, necessitating multiple extensions to enrollment deadlines. Additionally, skilled trade fairs have consistently experienced low attendance, with numbers falling below 40% of expectations on three occasions.

Furthermore, recent data from OneNS (One Nova Scotia Coalition, 2021) revealed alarming statistics regarding the unemployment rate among African Nova Scotians, which continues to surpass the provincial average. Specifically, the employment rate for African Nova Scotians stands at 46.1%, compared to the provincial average of 51.9%. This disparity is particularly pronounced among Black youth aged 20–24, with an unemployment rate of 26.4%. These unemployment figures, when combined with low enrollment in skills trades training, highlight the urgent need for conducting this study to address the issue of apathy toward training among the youth of people of African descent.

Literature Review on Apathy

Apathy toward development work denotes a pervasive lack of interest, enthusiasm, or concern among individuals or communities regarding involvement in initiatives to foster social, economic, or cultural progress (Wilson, 2010). This phenomenon manifests as a passive or indifferent stance, often resulting in a reluctance to actively participate in activities geared towards community development (Chikono, 2020; Henderson & Vercseg, 2010; Wilson, 2010). Various factors contribute to the prevalence of apathy in development efforts. These include systemic barriers, entrenched racism, socioeconomic disparities (Ginwright, 2010), historical injustices, and a dearth of representation or opportunities for meaningful engagement within marginalized communities (Bernard & Smith, 2018). Jones (2002) suggested that apathy tends to

be widespread in societies where youth encounter significant obstacles to opportunity and participation. Mullings et al. (2016) noted that in Canada, apathy among Black youth has been linked to systemic racism, particularly in policing and media representation.

Scholars have argued that African Nova Scotians' collective memories and identity formation are influenced by past traumatic events, such as school segregation (Bernard & Smith, 2018; George & Dei, 1996; Jean-Pierre, 2021). Addressing this apathy involves integrating people of African descent's social and cultural capital into the curriculum, promoting it, and fostering equitable building of trust and relationships between the youth of African descent and community institutions.

Engagement Through Ubuntu Dialogue

Research has shown that Ubuntu effectively engages people in fostering harmony (Chilisa, 2020; Swanson, 2007). Ubuntu dialogic methods empower communities, such as youth, to participate actively in community development initiatives. In the context of my proposed research, I propose using Ubuntu, an African philosophy emphasizing humanity's interconnectedness, empathy, and communal responsibility (Chilisa, 2020), to engage youth and explore the root causes of their apathy. It is a distinctive form of philosophy that contrasts with many Western philosophies that prioritize individualism, as Ubuntu stresses collective well-being and the notion that one's humanity is intertwined with others (Ewuoso & Hall, 2019). As cited by Ngubane and Makua (2021), Tutu stated that “this value of collective existence, as opposed to individual value, gave rise to the Zulu maxim of *Umuntu ungumuntu ngabantu* (my being is tied to your being, I am because you are)” (p. 4). In Ubuntu dialogue, participants are encouraged to approach each other with deep respect and dignity, recognizing the inherent worth of every person (Marovah & Mutanga, 2023). This method promotes empathetic listening and compassionate interaction, aiming to understand and appreciate each other's perspectives and experiences (Seneque et al., 2013). Unlike other dialogic methods prioritizing individual perspectives or competitive debate, Ubuntu dialogue strengthens communal bonds and relationships, fostering a sense of belonging and unity (Ewuoso & Hall, 2019). The goal is often to reach a consensus or mutual understanding that benefits the entire community rather than winning an argument or debate (Letseka, 2012).

Ubuntu dialogue is inclusive, valuing everyone's voice and welcoming diverse perspectives, which helps address the needs and concerns of the entire community (Marovah & Mutanga, 2023). Recognizing and validating marginalized community members' lived experiences and perspectives is crucial (Wells, 2011). Its sensitivity to cultural contexts and traditions makes Ubuntu dialogue adaptable to different cultural settings, enhancing its effectiveness in diverse communities. It fosters inclusive dialogues and meaningful engagement where participants feel heard, respected, and valued. Integrating culturally relevant content, methodologies, and resources, enables collaborative knowledge creation (Chilisa, 2020). Ubuntu dialogue promotes community, empathy, and collective decision-making, essential for addressing conflicts, building solidarity, and fostering respect and dignity (Ewuoso & Hall, 2019).

Research Questions

Drawing upon the reviewed literature, particularly Ubuntu dialogue, I have identified three research questions to help me address the research problem:

1. Why are some youths of African descent in Nova Scotia not interested in participating in community development despite the availability of resources from community-based organizations?
2. If Ubuntu dialogue is employed to engage youth of African descent's apathy towards community development, could it prompt a shift in their attitudes towards greater involvement?
3. Would participation in Ubuntu dialogue with youth of African descent in Nova Scotia yield a transformative experience?

A comprehensive approach will be employed to measure the shift in attitudes resulting from Ubuntu dialogue. This includes conducting in-depth interviews with participants to gain deeper insights into their personal journeys and changes in attitude (Goldman et al., 2019). Focus group discussions will be used to gather qualitative data on their experiences and perceptions.

Transformative Learning Theory

I plan to use Mezirow's (2003) transformative learning theory, which suggests that individuals undergo perspective transformation, becoming more critical and self-reflective in their thinking, feeling, and acting. This theory will guide my exploration of personal and collective transformation among youth of African descent, positing that individuals can critically reflect on their experiences, challenge existing power structures, and enact positive change (Mezirow, 2003). Concepts such as critical consciousness, empowerment, and participatory decision-making, will inform my research questions and approach to data collection, analysis, and interpretation. This theory is crucial for investigating why youth may not engage in community development and whether interventions, such as Ubuntu dialogue, can shift their attitudes. Mezirow's framework will help to analyze the impact of engaging in Ubuntu dialogue on participants' perspectives and behaviors, fostering their sense of interdependence and commitment to collective well-being. By documenting these shifts, the theory will assess the practical impact of Ubuntu dialogue on promoting sustained community involvement.

Proposed Research Methodology—Participatory Action Research

This proposed study will use participatory action research (PAR), prioritizing youth's active involvement in the research process and valuing their perspectives in co-creating interventions (Padayachee et al., 2023). This will begin with collaborative planning and goal setting with participants to build trust and co-design research activities. Participants will engage in relational interviews, community workshops, talking circles (focus groups), and capacity-building initiatives (Chilisa, 2020). Continuous observation and reflection will guide iterative data analysis, informing subsequent actions. Sibiyana et al. (2022) highlighted the significance of iterative cycles of action and reflection, wherein participants engage in collective inquiry, analysis, and decision-making. These cycles inform subsequent actions, ensuring that interventions are responsive to the evolving needs and realities of the community. This iterative process fosters continuous learning, adaptation, and the co-creation of sustainable solutions.

Multiple strategies will be employed to ensure the validity of this PAR. Triangulation will involve various data sources such as community workshops, talking circles (focus groups), and capacity-building initiatives. Member checking will allow participants to review and verify findings. Prolonged engagement with the community will build trust and provide deeper insights. Reflexivity will be maintained through continuous self-reflection by researchers. Peer debriefing will offer external perspectives to challenge and refine the research process. Instead of an external evaluator, participants will be actively involved in all stages, ensuring their voices are integral to planning, execution, and presentation. The evaluation will involve ongoing participant feedback at each stage and a review of the methodology, implementation, and outcomes. They will assess the effectiveness of the PAR process, data collection methods, and the responsiveness of interventions to the identified needs, providing an objective measure of the study's success in fostering sustainable community development initiatives (Pellerin, 2012).

For data collection, I will draw on the qualitative research methodologies described by Merriam (2016) and Chilisa (2020), offering comprehensive guidelines for conducting effective qualitative research. Merriam's work provides a detailed approach to action research, while Chilisa's contributions include in-depth strategies for participatory action research with the Indigenous (Africentric) community. Regarding data analysis, I will employ thematic analysis, as Braun and Clarke (2006) described. Their step-by-step guide on thematic analysis outlines how to identify, analyze systematically, and report patterns within data, ensuring a rigorous and replicable process. Braun and Clarke's framework will be instrumental in coding data, generating themes, and interpreting the findings meaningfully.

Participants

The study will focus on youth of African descent in Nova Scotia, considering factors such as age (ranging from 25 years to 30 years), gender, and socio-economic background.

Data Collection

Qualitative methods such as interviews, talking circles (focus groups), and participatory workshops will be employed to capture the participants' nuanced perspectives and experiences and allow for an in-depth exploration of the issues at hand. Interviews will explore participants' experiences in-depth, while focus groups will stimulate interaction and collective sense-making.

Data Analysis

Thematic analysis, informed by the qualitative nature of the research, will uncover patterns and insights from data collected through interviews, focus groups, and participant observation. This analysis will involve systematically identifying and analyzing patterns within the data, with active participation from youth participants. The process will be iterative, transparent, and guided by reflexivity, to ensure rigor and generate meaningful insights into youth perspectives on community development and apathy, adhering to transformative learning theory and Ubuntu principles of participatory engagement.

Ethical Considerations

Ethical considerations in research are paramount, emphasizing protecting participants' rights, dignity, and well-being (Rani & Sharma, 2012). I will be committed to these principles as an ethical researcher throughout my research endeavors. Before initiating my research, I will seek ethical approval from the Mount Saint Vincent University Research Ethics Board, ensuring my commitment to ethical and responsible conduct (Government of Canada, 2022).

Justification for the Research

This research is crucial for addressing the persistent apathy among youth of African descent in Nova Scotia toward community development, especially in the skilled trades initiatives. The youth of African descent in Nova Scotia have faced systemic injustices that limit their access to social and economic opportunities (Bernard & Smith, 2018; George & Dei, 1996). By uncovering root causes, this study will inform strategies to enhance youth involvement and promote the social and economic empowerment of people of African descent. Employing an Ubuntu-informed participatory action research approach, the study prioritizes youth's active involvement and perspectives, promoting shared ownership and empowerment. This approach addresses gaps in community engagement practices and aims to foster a deeper understanding of collective well-being and interdependence. The findings will provide valuable insights for developing inclusive and sustainable community development strategies that are culturally sensitive and responsive to the needs of diverse populations.

Conclusion

This study will employ an Ubuntu-informed PAR approach to explore and address socioeconomic challenges in community involvement of youth of African descent. By prioritizing their active involvement throughout the research process, this study aims to ensure that the participants' voices are integral to planning, execution, and presentation. Strategies such as triangulation, member checking, prolonged engagement, reflexivity, and peer debriefing, will be used to ensure the validity and reliability of the research findings. Evaluation will take the form of ongoing feedback at each stage, as the youth will continuously and actively participate, fostering a deep sense of ownership and empowerment. The methodologies for data collection and analysis will be grounded in the works of renowned qualitative researchers, including Merriam (2016), Chilisa (2020), and Braun and Clarke (2006), providing a robust framework for the study.

This research is expected to yield valuable insights into how participatory approaches can transform attitudes and behaviors, promoting interdependence, and collective well-being. By fostering shared ownership, empowerment, and sustainable solutions, this study aims to contribute to the broader discourse on community development and participatory research methodologies.

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