

6-1-2026

Fostering Developmentally Nurturant Relationships to Promote Character and Thriving: Perspectives of Program Practitioners in Rural South Africa

Jonathan M. Tirrell

Tufts University, jonathan.tirrell@tufts.edu

Alexa Hasse

Tufts University, alexa.hasse@tufts.edu

Margaret Mackin

Tufts University, margaret.mackin@tufts.edu

Elizabeth Dowling

Tufts University, elizabeth.dowling@tufts.edu

Kirsten Olander

Tufts University, kirsten.olander@tufts.edu

Follow this and additional works at: <https://open.clemson.edu/jyd>



Part of the [Child Psychology Commons](#), [Civic and Community Engagement Commons](#), [Community-Based Learning Commons](#), [Developmental Psychology Commons](#), and the [Leadership Studies Commons](#)
See next page for additional authors

Recommended Citation

Tirrell, Jonathan M.; Hasse, Alexa; Mackin, Margaret; Dowling, Elizabeth; Olander, Kirsten; Abbasi-Asl, Roya; McConnel, Katherine; Kwela, Thobeka; Msimango, Raah; McCarthy-Martin, Justine; Howard, Tyler; Larkan, Angela; and Lerner, Richard (2026) "Fostering Developmentally Nurturant Relationships to Promote Character and Thriving: Perspectives of Program Practitioners in Rural South Africa," *Journal of Youth Development*. Vol. 21: Iss. 2, Article 16.

Available at: <https://open.clemson.edu/jyd/vol21/iss2/16>

This Research and Evaluation Study is brought to you for free and open access by Clemson OPEN. It has been accepted for inclusion in Journal of Youth Development by an authorized editor of Clemson OPEN. For more information, please contact kokeefe@clemson.edu.

Fostering Developmentally Nurturant Relationships to Promote Character and Thriving: Perspectives of Program Practitioners in Rural South Africa

Authors

Jonathan M. Tirrell, Alexa Hasse, Margaret Mackin, Elizabeth Dowling, Kirsten Olander, Roya Abbasi-Asl, Katherine McConnel, Thobeka Kwela, Raah Msimango, Justine McCarthy-Martin, Tyler Howard, Angela Larkan, and Richard Lerner



Volume 21, Issue 2, Summer 2026
ISSN 2325-4017 (online)

Fostering Developmentally Nurturant Relationships to Promote Character and Thriving: Perspectives of Program Practitioners in Rural South Africa¹

Jonathan M. Tirrell, *Tufts University*

Alexa Hasse, *Tufts University*

Margaret Mackin, *Tufts University*

Elizabeth Dowling, *Tufts University*

Kirsten Olander, *Tufts University*

Roya Abbasi-Asl, *Tufts University*

Katherine McConnel, *Tufts University*

Thobeka Kwela, *Thanda*

Raah Msimango, *Thanda*

Justine McCarthy-Martin, *Thanda*

Tyler Howard, *Thanda*

Angela Larkan, *Thanda*

Richard Lerner, *Tufts University*

Abstract

Developmentally nurturant relationships are fundamental to enabling children to thrive across contexts, including homes, schools, and communities. Such relationships are also a central feature of effective positive youth development (PYD) programming. As strengths-based PYD programs are increasingly being adopted in majority-world countries, a better understanding of how to foster and promote developmentally nurturant relationships is needed. As part of the *Thanda Study of Character and Health*, we interviewed 15 program practitioners about their understandings of and approaches to fostering developmentally nurturant relationships with children enrolled in Thanda programs in rural KwaZulu-Natal, South Africa. Phenomenological analysis indicated that practitioners' understanding of and approaches to fostering developmentally nurturant relationships align with the Big Three features of effective youth programming: providing mentorship, life-skill-building activities, and opportunities to contribute and lead. Future directions are discussed regarding exploring the broader impact of these relationships on the positive development of young people in South Africa and other majority-world countries.

Keywords: developmentally nurturant relationships, positive youth development, Big Three, character strengths, youth program practitioners, Thanda, South Africa

Introduction

Strengths-based approaches to promoting positive youth development (PYD) are increasingly being adopted globally (see Banati et al., 2024; Lerner et al., 2019, 2021; YouthPower Learning, 2017). Youth programs aimed at promoting PYD typically involve several key features: (1) positive and sustained youth-adult relationships; (2) curricular activities that build life skills; and (3) opportunities for youth to contribute to and lead valued activities (Lerner, 2004; Tirrell et al., 2020, 2021). These features are termed the “Big Three” features of effective youth-development-program curricula and, when offered in a safe space, are purported to be effective in promoting PYD and thriving (Lerner, 2004; see also Eccles & Gootman, 2002; Larson & Walker, 2010; Roth & Brooks-Gunn, 2003).

To optimize program applications aimed at promoting PYD, descriptions and explanations of effective program features, such as the Big Three, are needed. Presently, youth perspectives of the Big Three and program safety are described in the literature (see Hay et al., 2024; Tirrell et al., 2020, 2021). Perspectives of program practitioners, however, are less understood (Alberts et al., 2006; Hershberg et al., 2015; King et al., 2005). Given that program practitioners comprise the adults with whom youth form developmentally nurturant relationships—the first and, perhaps, most important of the Big Three features (see Bowers et al., 2015; Roth & Brooks-Gunn, 2016; Theokas & Lerner, 2006)—descriptions of adult perspectives on forming developmentally nurturant relationships with youth are important and need to be investigated. In addition, whereas PYD has shaped youth programming globally, there have been relatively few studies on the impacts of PYD programming in majority-world contexts (Alvarado et al., 2017; Chowa et al., 2023).

The present study contributes to filling this gap by situating program practitioners’ voices within the broader PYD landscape to better understand how adults conceptualize and foster developmentally nurturant relationships in a Majority-world context. We first frame PYD programs within contemporary models of human development and describe the role of developmentally nurturant relationships in thriving. Next, we introduce the programs of Thanda and describe the rural South African context in which Thanda operates. We then present findings from a phenomenological qualitative study with Thanda practitioners, as part of the broader *Thanda Study of Character and Health*, to describe program practitioners’ understandings of and approaches to fostering developmentally nurturant relationships with youth.

The Role of Developmentally Nurturant Relationships

Development occurs through relationships—that is, development is instantiated through mutually influential relations between individuals and contexts (Cantor et al., 2021; Nucci, 2024; Overton, 2015) and among individuals across contexts (Lerner & Callina, 2014). Contemporary models of human development, framed by relational developmental systems (RDS) metatheory, emphasize that the fundamental process of development involves systematic, holistic, integrated, embodied, and mutually influential relations across the life span (Overton, 2015), often represented as *individual ↔ context relations* (e.g., Cantor et al., 2021; see also Bronfenbrenner & Morris, 2006). Positive development and thriving are therefore said to occur when those relations are mutually beneficial, supporting the positive development of both individual and context (e.g., Gottlieb, 1998; Johanson & Edey, 1981; Tobach & Schnierla, 1968).

Given that the contexts in which an individual develops are comprised of other individuals in their social world, thriving can further be described as occurring when *individual ↔ individual relationships* are mutually beneficial—that is, developmentally nurturant (e.g., Bornstein, 2015; Bornstein et al., 2022; Cantor & Osher, 2021; Cantor et al., 2021; Lerner, 2024; Lerner & Callina, 2014; Lerner et al., 2025; Tirrell et al., 2023). Whereas such models emphasize the mutuality of benefits within individual ↔ individual relationships, the present study is intentionally focused on how practitioners describe fostering developmentally nurturant relationships in support of youth thriving.

Indeed, developmentally nurturant relationships are the foundation of RDS-based theories and models of human development and of healthy thriving across the lifespan (Lerner, 2018a, 2018b). Such theories and models include those of Bronfenbrenner and Morris (2006), regarding human development as being nested within bioecological systems; those of Raelin (2016, 2020), regarding the development of complex human cognitive, affective, and cultural systems; and those of Fischer and colleagues (see Mascolo & Biddell, 2020; Mascolo & Fischer, 2015), regarding dynamic skills development, cognition, and holistic learning. Nurturant relationships are also linked to the healthy development and evolution of all biological life, as evidenced by social genomics and the epigenetic changes that occur across development as individuals and contexts coact (Cole, 2014; Slavich & Cole, 2013; see also Jablonka & Lamb, 2005; Johanson & Edey, 1981; Tobach & Schneirla, 1968; Witherington & Lickliter, 2016).

Taken together, within dynamic, RDS-based theories and models, developmentally nurturant relationships are necessary for healthy development and thriving. Whereas parents and parent-child relationships serve as important developmental assets in the positive development of children (e.g., Flouri & Buchanan, 2004; Laursen & Collins, 2009; Lewin-Bizan et al., 2010), support from non-parental adults, such as teachers and mentors, also promotes PYD (Bowers et al., 2012; Rhodes & Lowe, 2009). Important non-parental adults are typically the role models and advocates in contexts that are meaningful to youth, such as out-of-school time programming (National Academies of Sciences, Engineering, and Medicine, 2025). As such, these relationships may act as developmental assets that support PYD outcomes (Benson et al., 2006; Bowers et al., 2012).

The presence and characteristics of youth relationships with non-parental adult figures have been associated with a variety of behavioral, socioemotional, and psychological outcomes during adolescence (Bowers et al., 2012; Dubois & Silverthorn, 2005a, 2005b; Greenberger et al., 1998; Zimmerman et al., 2002). For instance, youth who have positive relationships with non-parental adult mentors, compared to peers without such mentorship, report heightened self-esteem and life satisfaction, greater levels of physical activity, reduced problem behavior (e.g., risk-taking, gang membership) (Dubois & Silverthorn, 2005a, 2005b), and positive outcomes related to education (e.g., more positive attitudes toward school) (Zimmerman et al., 2002). Positive relationships with nonparental-adult mentors have also been linked with skill growth and character strengths, including increased confidence and empathy (Lunsford, 2016) as well as feelings of belonging and trust in others (Cooper & Minness, 2014). Given that such relationships are a central feature of effective PYD programs, as described by the Big Three (Lerner, 2004; Tirrell et al., 2020, 2021), researchers and practitioners have an interest in understanding and promoting them.

A majority of research around effective youth programming has been conducted with U.S.-based samples. Less is known about how these findings apply to Majority-world countries such as South Africa (Page et al., 2023). However, the few studies that have focused on the impact of youth development programming in South Africa have pointed to the importance of developmentally nurturant child-adult relationships in youth thriving and emphasized additional components of the Big Three, as well as safety. For instance, for youth in a South African after-school soccer program, the primary factor contributing to their perceived improved self-efficacy and agency was their sense that they were part of a “family;” participants expressed that they felt like they “belonged;” and indicated that feelings of safety in the program contributed to this sense of belonging (Draper & Coalter, 2016). In addition, a meta-analysis of youth development programs focused on female empowerment, located in South Asia and Sub-Saharan Africa, found that the activities in the programs strengthened adolescents’ psychosocial well-being by increasing their self-esteem, and pointed to the importance of life-skill-building activities (Marcus et al., 2017). Furthermore, several programs enhanced girls’ leadership skills, promoted their civic and political engagement, and supported their connections with nurturant adults in their community (see Udeh et al., 2023).

Thanda and the South Africa Context

One program operating in the majority world focused on fostering developmentally nurturant youth-adult relationships to promote PYD is Thanda in South Africa. Founded in 2008, Thanda (which means “to love” in Zulu) is a non-profit community-based organization that aims to promote character strengths including curiosity and generosity and to foster resilience, agency, and a sense of belonging among youth (Thanda, n.d.a). Thanda works in the Umzumbe Municipality, a historically underserved, rural area in KwaZulu-Natal, South Africa, where poverty is extreme. The average annual household income is R14,600 (about USD \$805) and, according to the last census, the employment rate is 14.1% (Statistics South Africa, 2011, 2016).

Some conditions have improved in the area in recent years—for instance, 95.2% of households now have electricity for lighting (up from 73.2% in 2016 and 49.0% in 2011—Municipalities of South Africa, n.d.; Statistics South Africa, 2011, 2016). However, 12.4% have no access to tap water (Statistics South Africa, 2022). Furthermore, many children have limited access to early education and face both nutritional and health challenges. Less than 16% of children under age 5 have access to early learning opportunities, and nearly 29% of children suffer from stunting. In regard to child rearing, approximately 40% of children are raised by a grandparent (Hall et al., 2016).

Poverty-related challenges (e.g., poor nutrition and limited access to healthcare and quality education) also negatively affect children’s social and emotional development and health (Evans & Kim, 2007; Lupien et al., 2001). Poverty is associated with heightened stress in parents as they seek to protect and provide for their children, which increases the likelihood of emotionally distant and inconsistent parenting practices (Ritchie & Holden, 1998). Thanda leadership describes the distant and uninvolved parenting in their community as “despondent parenting,” which leads to hopelessness and a sense of failure among youth (Thanda, 2021). Furthermore, children are taught to repress their emotions and are socialized to think their opinions are not welcomed or considered, which further contributes to a “failure to thrive,” both physically and emotionally (Thanda, 2021).

In alignment with a systems-based approach to youth development, Thanda aims to build safer, more resilient communities for children across individuals, households, and communities. Thanda offers three initiatives: (1) Early Childhood Development; (2) Child and Youth Development—the focus of this article—which entails after-school (AS) programming; and (3) Food Insecurity and Economic Development (Thanda, n.d.b). Thanda has also developed neighborhood learning circles, where entire communities gather to participate in child development workshops, and a Home Visiting program, where staff visit families at their homes to promote positive parenting. Thanda’s AS programming offers a curriculum focused on foundational skills (e.g., numeracy, literacy) and life skills (e.g., mastery, confidence) fostered through games, art, group discussions, and projects (Thanda, n.d.a). Specific program offerings include, for instance, those that focus on cultivating children’s confidence (termed “Siyazi,” or “To Know Yourself”); boys’ and girls’ leadership programs that emphasize solidarity, community responsibility, and agency; and a program that covers topics such as gender stereotypes, puberty, and safety (Thanda, n.d.a).

Thanda’s AS programming is based on the character strengths constituting the philosophy of Ubuntu, the sub-Saharan African principle that emphasizes interconnectedness, interdependence, and shared humanity (“I am because we are”)—values that have eroded in the area due to Westernization and urbanization (e.g., Makhonza et al., 2019; Patel et al., 2024). The character strengths at the core of Thanda’s AS programs include generosity and curiosity. Thanda believes that, through nurturing and loving relationships with program practitioners, fostering these strengths reduces the psychological and physical stress on children and allows for the development of skills that enhance their well-being and health (Thanda, n.d.a).

The Present Study

Based on Thanda's AS programming, we sought to better understand the role of developmentally nurturant youth-adult relationships in promoting PYD. By developing a descriptive system regarding adult understandings of and approaches to fostering these relationships, one that included the perceived links of these relationships to well-being and thriving, we might contribute to future research seeking to explain the role of such relationships in PYD. Such work may also support future applications seeking to optimize PYD. Taken together, we recognize both theoretical value and potential applied significance in exploring the lived experiences of PYD program practitioners in fostering developmentally nurturant relationships with youth. We therefore examined the perceptions of Thanda program practitioners using a qualitative, phenomenological approach (Creswell & Poth, 2018; Hsieh & Shannon, 2005).

Method

The goal of the present research was, first, to describe adult program practitioner understandings of and approaches to fostering developmentally nurturant relationships with youth and, second, to illuminate the role of those relationships in promoting PYD and thriving. Consistent with RDS-based models of PYD, developmentally nurturant relationships between adults and youth are a key feature of effective PYD programs (Lerner, 2004, 2018a; Tirrell et al., 2020, 2021) and such relationships enable youth to feel that they matter and that they are known and loved; such feelings are linked to thriving (Tirrell et al., 2023). We conducted qualitative interviews with Thanda program practitioners to better understand the role of nurturant relationships in the lives of Thanda-enrolled children. More specifically, we examined the degree to which Thanda practitioners believe relationships between practitioners and youth impact the positive development of youth at Thanda, including character strengths development, with a focus on curiosity and generosity.

Participants

We interviewed 15 adults working as program practitioners at Thanda ($M_{age} = 47.73$, $SD_{age} = 7.47$). We used a criterion, purposive sampling strategy (Miles & Huberman, 1994) given our focus on adults involved in developmentally nurturant relationships with youth. Those selected to participate in the interviews included practitioners who were at least 18 years old, spoke English, and had more than one year of experience in a youth-facing role at Thanda. Recruitment involved Thanda leadership nominating practitioners and inviting them to participate. The Thanda leadership team, comprised of two females and one male, included the Executive Director and Co-Founder of Thanda, the Head of Programs and Community Engagement, and the Head of Program Evaluation.

In regard to the nomination process, Thanda leadership reviewed employment records to identify staff members meeting eligibility criteria and who demonstrated strong engagement in direct work with children. Approximately 105 staff members were employed at Thanda during the time of data collection, of whom 25 were youth-facing staff and 15 met the eligibility criteria; all 15 were invited to participate and all agreed. The majority were women ($n = 13$), reflecting the broader gender composition of Thanda's youth-facing staff. Practitioners' average tenure at Thanda was 6.29 years.

Members of the research team developed a semi-structured interview protocol (see Appendix for the protocol and question set). The protocol focused on developmentally nurturant relationships between Thanda practitioners and youth, with emphases on the ways Thanda practitioners believe that they foster developmentally nurturant relationships; the perceived impact of child-practitioner relationships on youth; how Thanda practitioners cultivate character strengths such as generosity and curiosity in their relationships; and the ways Thanda youth differ from those not enrolled in Thanda.

Procedure

Ethics review approval to conduct this research was granted by the researchers' university Institutional Review Board and from the South African Research Ethics Committee. Interviews were conducted in January 2024 at the Thanda AS program center, located in the Umzumbe Municipality of KwaZulu-Natal, South Africa, and were led by two members of the research team. The research team members interviewed participants in a Thanda meeting room where privacy was assured. Participants had the option to not respond to any question and/or to end the interview at any time. All interviews were conducted in English and lasted 17-57 minutes ($M_{length} = 32:22$, $SD_{length} = 12:59$). Interviews were recorded, and each recording was transcribed for data analysis. Given that Thanda leadership agreed that interviews could be conducted during practitioners' working hours and count toward their working time, participants were not compensated financially. Snacks and drinks were offered during each interview.

Data Analysis

Interviews were coded in NVivo 14 by four researchers using conventional content analysis for phenomenological inquiry (Creswell & Poth, 2018; Hsieh & Shannon, 2005). The coding team inductively coded three transcripts independently. Themes were collectively decided, using participants' own words/phrasings, to establish a codebook. Using the codebook, two of the researchers coded all the transcripts independently. The two researchers met regularly to modify the codebook as necessary. At the conclusion of coding, the researchers compared codes, resolved discrepancies, and established 100% inter-rater agreement.

Methodological Integrity

In keeping with recommendations for methodological integrity and transparency (Levitt et al., 2018), we outline the research team's background and assumptions and how they were considered and addressed during the study. Interviews were conducted by two senior members of the research team, both of whom have, together, nearly three decades of experience conducting applied research on PYD. Both had previously traveled to South Africa to learn about the local context and build the Thanda partnership over three years—experiences that informed the development of the semi-structured interview protocol.

At the same time, the research team recognized that their expertise could introduce interpretive assumptions about features of developmentally nurturant relationships related to PYD models. To address these assumptions, analytic discussions emphasized grounding interpretations in participants' language and lived experiences rather than theoretical expectations. For example, when codes reflected constructs drawn from PYD literature (e.g., "caring" [Lerner et al., 2005]), the team revisited transcripts to ensure alignment with participants' phrasing (e.g., practitioners modeling "respect for others," teaching children to "care for" others).

Data analysis was led by four researchers, including one interviewer and three graduate students, two of whom had also visited Thanda. The team engaged in iterative coding discussions to refine the codebook and discuss how their backgrounds might shape interpretation. This process of ongoing reflexivity enabled the team to surface and interrogate underlying assumptions, thereby strengthening the trustworthiness and credibility of the findings (Rose & Johnson, 2020).

Results

Thanda practitioners shared how they understand and cultivate developmentally nurturant youth-adult relationships, aligning specifically with the "positive and sustained adult-youth relationships" component of the Big Three features of effective PYD programming. Within this theme, practitioners conveyed that they

focused on relating to children (e.g., in a familial role; as a peer); modeling positive behavior; and listening to, supporting, and guiding children. Additional features of effective PYD programming—contextual safety, life-skill-building activities, and opportunities for contribution and leadership—emerged as key themes in the interviews.

In presenting findings, it is important to acknowledge the methodological considerations involved in their interpretation. To avoid creating a misleading impression of precision given the non-random, purposive sample (Maxwell, 2010), we refrain from reporting whole numbers or percentages. Instead, to provide a sense of internal generalizability, we describe findings as emerging from nearly all of the 15 participants (12 or more participants; 80–100% of the sample), most (8–11; about 53–73%), some (4–7; about 27–47%), or a few (1–3; up to 20%). All names presented in the sections below are pseudonyms.

Positive and Sustained Youth-Adult Relationships

At Thanda, positive youth-adult relationships are central to fostering children's growth, with practitioners playing key roles in relating to children; serving as role models; and listening, supporting, and guiding children.

Relating to Children

Nearly all practitioners discussed how they shape their behavior to meet the needs of children. For example, practitioners adopt different roles in their relationships with children, influenced by the unique socio-cultural context and the generational gaps present in many families. Some practitioners take on familial roles, serving as figures of support and stability; as Buhle notes, “even though [children] have the parents at home ... they need me as close as the parents.” Other practitioners described themselves as adopting more peer-like roles to build rapport with children, meeting children “on the same level” and engaging with them in ways that reflect shared enthusiasm and energy. For example, Nolwazi noted:

Kids love someone with ... always high energy ... and also not having this thing of saying ‘I’m an adult.’ ... When I’m with the kids, I just be the kid.

In addition, some Thanda practitioners reported that they aim to recognize and respond to the individual needs and experiences of each child. For instance, Nofoto described how she may adjust classroom activities to ensure children of different abilities feel included and supported:

Say, for instance, in class, the activity that they’re doing, they have to write, but I know that Dumisani can’t write, so I need to understand how Dumisani ... writes for him to be able to finish the activity and feel like he did the activity like everyone else.

Participants also emphasized how they must be attuned to children's home and family lives and adjust the way they engage with them accordingly. As an example, in the Thanda context, many children are raised by their grandparents, who often “don’t have time to sit with [children], talk to them, and ... share with them.” As such, practitioners work to recognize when certain children “need to share something, they need supports” and seek to “open all those opportunities” for children.

Role Modeling

Role modeling emerged as an important component of positive youth-adult relationships between Thanda practitioners and children. Nearly all practitioners described how their attitudes and behavior serve as a guide for children, offering both practical lessons and emotional support. For instance, in describing what it means for children to have a nurturant relationship with an adult, Ayize noted:

I think what it means for kids is like having somebody to look up to. It's giving them that safe space, knowing that I have somebody to approach. If [they] have any issues, they feel free to talk about things that they are coming across in their daily lives. You know, having that somebody to look up to, somebody who's older than me, who has gone through what you are going through at the moment.

Here, practitioners linked openness in communication with their role-modeling function, positioning themselves as guides.

Respect for others was another key value emphasized through role modeling. Thanda practitioners were mindful that their own relationships—with colleagues, with the community, and with children—are observed and internalized. As Jabulie described,

The way that we talk is the way that children see, so we make sure that everything we do is about respect—respecting ourselves, respecting the community, and respecting the kids.

Kgabu discussed the importance of respecting children's thoughts and opinions just as they hope that children, in turn, respect their ideas:

I take their opinions, too, as I want them to take my opinion. If I don't take their opinion, I don't think they will act as if they're taking my opinion. But we know that they won't take it; they won't respect it as much as if I was listening to them and respecting them.

Along with modeling how to listen to others and listening to children in general, supporting and guiding them arose as a prominent sub-theme of positive and sustained youth-adult relationships.

Listening, Supporting, and Guiding

When discussing developmentally nurturant relationships, the sub-theme of listening, supporting, and guiding emerged among all participants. In listening to children, Thanda practitioners explained how they seek to be present and available for children. Practitioners again emphasized children's desire to share openly; however, under this theme, the emphasis was on being present and validating their voices, rather than on role modeling. As Lerato described:

Every child will want you to listen to them. So, you have to be a listener most of the time. If she comes or he comes and tell a story and tell you, 'This is what happened, this is how I feel today,' you'd be like, 'oh, okay, really? How did you feel? How are you feeling now?' So they just want us to ... listen to them.

Ayanda underscored the importance of practitioners listening to children in the context of cultural norms that diminish children's thoughts and opinions: "Mostly in our society, kids are not being heard—I mean, yeah, as much as they're still kids, but they are human, they do have something to say." Thus, practitioners again emphasized children's desire to share openly; and, again, there was an emphasis on being present and validating youth voices, rather than on role modeling.

Support is an integral component of positive youth-adult relationships, particularly for children who may lack such support at home. For many children, parents may be "lacking parenting skills" and grandparents "don't have that time to comfort them." As Buhle elaborated, "[grannies] don't have this time to sit with them, talk to them. ... So I make sure [to] ... open all those opportunities." Philani noted that the support they provide to children is particularly important for those children raised in abusive homes. He described how they have been able to try to cultivate a healthier home environment by way of the Home

Visiting program; through practitioners' close engagement with parents, children feel "supported" and "protected."

For practitioners, the key to guidance is not providing youth with explicit instructions or orders, but creating a space for them to explore, consider possible outcomes, and problem solve. Nofoto explained:

Guiding them is more of asking a lot of questions so that they can be able to kind of find answers on their own. ... It's more like finding the answers for themselves but giving them different types of options.

Similarly, Inyoni emphasized that part of the guidance that practitioners provide entails offering children "a space to explore" and encouraging them to "look at their problem ... their way of doing things, and then come up with their own strategies."

Program Safety

For children to feel heard, supported, and encouraged to find their own solutions to challenges, all participating Thanda practitioners discussed the importance of cultivating a safe space. Within this theme, sub-themes emerged pertaining to creating a sense of belonging as well as a space in which children can participate in open and honest conversations.

Sense of Belonging

In reflecting on their relationships with children at Thanda, nearly all participants framed Thanda as a place of belonging, describing how Thanda can be a "second home" and a place that children can take "ownership of." Indeed, Buhle noted that having "good relationships" with the children was rooted in "mak[ing] sure they feel at home." Other practitioners similarly described how they establish Thanda as a place children can call their own. Isisa explained that, on the very first day of each new year, practitioners teach children a lesson on belonging. As a part of this lesson, the children collectively create "a room for everybody to belong" by each painting their initials on the wall. Similarly, Inyoni explained how, as a group, children in the Thanda program create class "agreements" about "how they want to be treated" and "how they all have a right to state whatever they feel." Generating and holding one another accountable to these communal agreements allows the children to "take ownership of the program." These perspectives convey the value and effort Thanda practitioners put forth in working jointly with the children to co-create a space of belonging.

For Thanda practitioners, part of creating an environment that can act as a second home is providing a space where children are shown love every day, and by multiple people. For example, participants discussed how they aim to make children understand that "everyone" at Thanda is there to help and support them, not just their peers and immediate program practitioners. Liyana described how she will take the children "to greet all those who are in the kitchen" to highlight all the people at Thanda caring for them. She also explained how Thanda practitioners routinely try to show children love:

The adults have to make sure that the child is safe every time. Show love. Beautiful thing. ... And the child life to be touched every time. If you came next to the child and say 'hi,' the child can see that, 'oh, this one loves me.'

As Mhabi summarized, in experiencing developmentally nurturant relationships, children "feel loved ... like they belong ... and free, in a way" due to practitioners "protecting them and making sure they're safe and giving them love." Such a space provides opportunities for youth to talk and share openly with adults within the Thanda program.

Open Conversations

As noted, listening to children and valuing their opinions is an important part of how Thanda staff understand developmentally nurturant relationships. Relatedly, for nearly all Thanda practitioners, creating a safe space was inextricable from what one participant identified as a key element of nurturant relationships: “communicating freely.” Thanda practitioners noted that by being “warm” and “welcoming,” the children are “not afraid” of the practitioners. Instead, the practitioners are people the children “can come to when they are down.” At Thanda, practitioners act as outlets for children to “express themselves without being expected to be judged or without ... fear that ‘what if I say this?’” In talking about having open conversations with children, Ayanda shared:

They are not scared of [me], which is very important, because, in schools, when we were growing up, we used to be scared of most of the teachers and the teacher would be happy about that like, ‘the kids are in line.’ ... But that doesn’t help the child. Because the child is not open with you. The child doesn’t feel comfortable around you.

These youth-adult relationships stand in contrast to the above-noted socio-cultural norms within their community that can limit children’s opportunities to engage in conversations with adults.

This point reflects a broader culture of little transparency between children and adults. For instance, Philani explained, “in the Black community, you are not allowed to ask questions [to] adults.” Inyoni similarly shared, “within our culture ... there are things that the kids can share with adults and there are things that they can only share with their peers.” However, she went on to say that, at Thanda, children “can share anything they want to share,” and, in doing so, “break this kind of ... generational thing.” Put simply, Thanda practitioners push back against cultural norms and seek to create a space for open and honest conversations between adults and children.

Children’s access to trusted adults for safe discussions is further limited by common familial structures within Thanda’s rural community. Kgabu, a facilitator of one of Thanda’s Boy’s Leadership programs, shared that many of the boys at Thanda do not have father figures within their households and thus turn to Thanda practitioners:

They come here; they get to speak with us. They can ask us anything they want. It’s confidential too.... For them, it’s so hard to, like, talk about the boys’ stuff with their parents, like their moms. So, some of the questions, they just come and ask us.

Other participants similarly described how confidentiality and trust help create a space in which children feel free to speak openly, particularly in regard to subject matters that they may not be able to share with other adults in their lives. As Lerato discussed, “They can say even like they are having troubles. They’re failing at school. ... We [Thanda practitioners] are the ones that they’re free to share those things with.” Thus, confidentiality and trust help ensure that Thanda children can safely engage in open conversations with Thanda practitioners, allowing practitioners to act as resources for information children may not otherwise be able to glean from other adults.

Life-Skill-Building Activities and Opportunities for Contribution and Leadership

We asked practitioners to reflect on how their relationships with children at Thanda foster curiosity and generosity: core life skills and character strengths that Thanda intentionally seeks to promote among the children they serve. Practitioners noted differences between Thanda and non-Thanda youth regarding these core skills and additional skills, the most notable of which was self-esteem. Practitioners were also

asked to reflect on how the positive relationships afforded to youth at Thanda may contribute to differences between Thanda children and non-Thanda children.

Curiosity

Nearly all participants shared the ways in which their relationships with youth may foster curiosity. Most program practitioners described seeking to promote curiosity by creating a space where children feel free to ask questions, and practitioners encourage them to do so. Practitioners also described openness as integral to fostering curiosity. As Lerato noted: “You’re allowed to ask any question that you want to ask. So that’s the most important thing that we do. We allow kids to talk.” Practitioners also observed that Thanda children demonstrate a strong sense of agency in seeking knowledge, particularly compared to non-Thanda-enrolled children. As Nofoto observed:

In a normal neighborhood, if you put something unusual in a room, nobody would touch it. But the Thanda kids would take it, flip it, put it upside down, eager to learn.

A few participants noted that children at Thanda have an expanded view of the world and, thus, are more curious about new possibilities, especially compared to non-Thanda children. For example, one participant noted that Thanda children are “open-minded” because practitioners encourage children to ask questions and guide them in reaching their own conclusions—an approach to learning that “is very different from [the local] education system.” Amahle shared that non-Thanda children often base their career aspirations on what they observe in their immediate surroundings: “they are stuck on what they know, what is happening in the community, like police, nurses. They don’t know about the other careers.” Amahle also described shifts in children’s goals and ambitions over time:

When I’m going back to that kid and ask kids what you want to become in future, now they want to be an environmental scientist. They want to be a scientist. So, they [are] learning at Thanda, they are growing. So, I think those strategies we are using ... make them [have] curiosity ... think out of the box.

Self-Esteem

Most participants also highlighted self-esteem as a skill children cultivate through their participation in Thanda. It is important to note that in discussions about self-esteem, Thanda practitioners linked this skill to children talking openly at Thanda in addition to children being encouraged to ask questions. Nandi reflected, “At Thanda, I think they boost the children’s self-esteem and ... [the children have the] ability to ask questions and not be scared of asking questions.” Philani expressed:

In the past, our parents were not allowed to even go to Grade 3. When you are able to write, then your parents would say, ‘Okay, stop. Now we must go and marry someone who must go to work,’ or stuff like that—today, kids, with the parent that they have. But now, since they joined Thanda ... they ask questions of their parents ... compared to those who are not attending Thanda. ... This is why they have a high self-esteem. They ask questions a lot.

This bolstering of self-esteem, particularly as it relates to asking questions, contrasts with how children are seen within the community context.

Practitioners indicated how children’s high self-esteem can conflict with the ways the community believes children should behave. Participants explained how, outside of Thanda, community members perceive Thanda-enrolled children’s high self-esteem as a form of disrespect. As Liyane indicated, Thanda practitioners are teaching children “to speak for themselves,” but the surrounding community members “don’t understand, they just say the Thanda kids are disrespecting. They are talking too much.” Thanda

children are empowered to speak up, ask questions, and share their thoughts. However, this behavior does not align with long-standing contextual expectations of children within the community and thus can be perceived as negative.

Generosity

Nearly all participants discussed how they seek to cultivate generosity, for instance, by fostering empathy, inclusion, and connections with peers as well as tasking children with responsibilities, opening opportunities for youth leadership. Regarding the former, Inyoni recounted how a group of children at Thanda experienced in athletics struggled to engage with a group of visiting children who were less experienced, which prompted a class discussion about the importance of empathy. She encouraged children to “put [their] shoes into that other person’s shoe.” In regard to inclusion, Inyoni also discussed how she seeks to “give each [child] a chance to share what they want to share” during class so that others “know and understand that we come from different places and also think differently.” Ayanda shared how practitioners facilitate peer connections by encouraging children to form friendships through classroom activities, such as making friendship bracelets and supporting each other (e.g., cheering each other after presentations, engaging in small group activities).

Some Thanda practitioners also discussed how they seek to teach children about the importance of responsibility by encouraging children to care of their younger peers. For example, Kgabu noted how within the Boys Leadership Program, the older boys are responsible for taking care of the younger boys:

I can say because, with boys, we tend to make them be the ones who take care. Like the older boys, for instance, like Grade 9s and 10s, they are the ones who take care of the Grade 6. They cook for them, they fry for them, and then they wash dishes the following day for them. So now these young boys can see that, ‘oh, this is good,’ you know? ‘I love this. I love being treated this way.’ So now when they come to Grade 8 and 9, they now know their responsibilities to take care of your young ones.

Similarly, Nandi noted how she encourages children to care for each other regardless of age: “by being caring ... whether the other child is younger or older than you, whenever something bad happens to them, you must show that you’re sorry.”

Taken together, Thanda practitioners described promoting life skills that not only fostered children’s development but also instilled a sense of responsibility to and for others. Practitioners reinforced these skills among Thanda-enrolled children by curating opportunities for them to contribute to and lead valued program activities.

Discussion

Thanda takes a strengths-based, PYD approach in seeking to promote the health, well-being, and thriving of youth. In the present study, we sought to illuminate program practitioners’ perspectives regarding fostering developmentally nurturant adult-youth relationships—the first of the Big Three features of effective PYD programs. Practitioners’ perspectives further highlighted the connection between these relationships and the other Big Three features, such as program safety, life-skill-building activities, and opportunities for contribution and leadership (Lerner, 2004; Tirrell et al., 2020, 2021).

Regarding positive and sustained youth-adult relationships, findings underscore the important role of such relationships for both adults and children. Program practitioners serve as listeners and role models, creating an environment where they hope to help children feel valued and supported. In addition to offering emotional guidance, practitioners help children navigate challenges by encouraging problem-solving and autonomy rather than providing direct solutions. Practitioners also recognize the importance

of adaptability in their relationships, taking on familial or peer-like roles based on children's needs while maintaining program structure and expectations.

Findings highlight the role of program practitioners in creating a safe space for this development to unfold. Thanda practitioners discussed how they work to ensure the psychological and social-relational safety of children at Thanda such that children can be open and honest with them, marking what they described as a critical component of developmentally nurturant relationships. Practitioners described Thanda as a "second home," where children feel a sense of belonging, mattering, and acceptance, aligning with research emphasizing the importance of safe spaces in promoting youth engagement and well-being (Eccles & Gootman, 2002).

Importantly, the safe environment at Thanda contrasts with broader cultural norms that may discourage open communication between children and adults. Participants noted that children often face barriers to expressing themselves freely at home or in school due to hierarchical relationships and cultural expectations around adult authority. Thanda's approach challenges these norms by fostering open, judgment-free conversations. The closeness and acceptance that participants described in their relationships with youth align with research identifying such relationships with nonparental adults as being linked to positive youth outcomes, such as higher educational attainment, well-being, and self-esteem (Dubois & Silverthorn, 2005a, 2005b; Greenberger et al., 1998).

Regarding opportunities for life-skill-building activities, Thanda practitioners' relationships with children contribute to the promotion of skills and character strengths—notably, curiosity, generosity, and self-esteem. Practitioners described creating an environment where children feel free and encouraged to ask questions and explore their surroundings. Compared to their non-Thanda peers, children in Thanda programs were described as more inquisitive and exhibiting a greater openness to new possibilities, such as diverse career aspirations, which aligns with literature pointing to expanded worldviews in the context of healthy and positive relationships between youth and adults outside of their families (Scales & Roehlkepartain, 2018). Participants also noted that they seek to cultivate children's self-esteem by empowering them to express themselves, which, as noted previously, conflicts with broader societal norms around youth voicing their opinions.

Practitioners also described hoping to foster generosity by promoting empathy, inclusion, and connections with peers. They encourage children to support one another and develop a sense of care for their peers (e.g., through structured activities such as the Boys Leadership Program). In the context of the Big Three, the theme of generosity was therefore described as both a life skill and as an opportunity to contribute to and lead valued activities. Practitioners discussed how they ask children within Thanda, particularly those enrolled in leadership programming, to take on the responsibility of looking after younger children. Research in the United States similarly highlights youth working with younger peers as an important component of PYD programming that facilitates the development of skills pertinent to leadership, such as responsibility (Bates et al., 2020).

Taken together, findings suggest that practitioners cultivate developmentally nurturant relationships that create opportunities for children to renegotiate socio-cultural expectations around authority, voice, and self-expression in ways that remain grounded in Ubuntu values of relational care. In South African contexts, hierarchical intergenerational relationships, which are often viewed by older generations as a "pillar of traditional African social relations," can limit youth agency (Campbell, 1994, p. 37). By working to foster confidence, empathy, and leadership through their relationships with youth, practitioners create spaces for youth to challenge these expectations in ways that remain grounded in the African philosophy of Ubuntu, which emphasizes interconnectedness and mutual responsibility (Makhonza et al., 2019; Patel et al., 2024). Such an approach, aligning with cultural values of relational care, point to potential pathways for supporting both individual and collective youth thriving.

Limitations and Future Directions

The present study is not without limitations, particularly regarding sampling and data collection procedures. The use of a small ($N = 15$) and purposive, nonrandom sample that was predominately female (83%) limits the generalizability of the findings. For instance, with respect to gender, the themes that arose in the interviews may reflect the largely female sample. In the youth-adult mentorship literature, two different types of mentoring have been identified: psychosocial and instrumental (Flaxman et al., 1998). Instrumental mentoring is often problem-focused; that is, the mentor helps the mentee solve a specific problem. Psychosocial mentoring, by contrast, is more process-based compared to problem-based, and focuses on the interpersonal relationship between mentor and mentee. Research on mentoring in the workplace indicates that male mentors tend to provide more instrumental support, whereas female mentorships are often marked by more psychosocial and emotional support (e.g., Allen & Eby, 2004; Allen et al., 2006; Burke et al., 1993; Ragins & Cotton, 1993; Sosik & Godshalk, 2000; Struthers, 1995).

Indeed, our findings reflect many psychosocial, as compared to instrumental, themes, such as “supporting, listening, and guiding,” and “open conversations.” Although our focus was on developmentally nurturant relationships rather than formal mentoring, these patterns raise the possibility that our findings may overrepresent the psychosocial and relational dimensions of such relationships, while underrepresenting more instrumental or task-oriented aspects. Future research should examine whether practitioner gender influences how developmentally nurturant relationships are enacted and described.

With respect to other concerns related to sampling, given that recruitment involved Thanda leadership nominating practitioners and inviting them to participate, there may have been characteristics endogenous to those participants who engaged in the study that differed from practitioners who were not nominated (Schaie & Strother, 1968; Siegler & Botwinick, 1979), which may have further biased the sample. That is, it may be that these practitioners were nominated because they invested extra time and effort to develop nurturant relationships with Thanda-enrolled children. The sample also consisted of English-speaking practitioners from one PYD program located in a single rural community in South Africa. Future research should include larger, more diverse (e.g., with respect to gender, geographic region and practitioners’ backgrounds [e.g., level of professional experience, etc.]), and randomly selected samples. The use of focus groups may also complement individual interviews to allow for collective reflection and dialogue, which may elicit perspectives not captured in one-on-one interviews. In addition, the present sample did not include Thanda-enrolled youth perceived to be benefitting from these relationships. Future research should therefore seek to incorporate youth voices to better understand how they think about and experience developmentally nurturant youth-adult relationships. The absence of the youth perspective is notable, as Theron (2016) suggests that, within South Africa, there are few qualitative, youth-driven studies that explore how youth, specifically Black and socio-economically disadvantaged youth, understand how their contextual supports (e.g., the Big Three) facilitate their positive outcomes.

Furthermore, interviews for this study were conducted within the Thanda site and led by U.S.-based researchers. Setting the interviews within participants’ place of employment and asking them to respond to questions from external interviewers may have influenced participants’ responses. Interviewers sought to lessen this social desirability bias by clearly communicating the purpose of the study, ensuring confidentiality, and emphasizing that their responses would not have any bearing on their position at Thanda (Bergen & Labonté, 2020).

Whereas the central focus of this article is on how practitioners foster developmentally nurturant relationships to support youth, such relationships may also contribute to positive outcomes for practitioners. Future research should examine the bidirectional relations between youth and practitioners—particularly in majority world contexts—more directly, contributing to a fuller understanding of the benefits of developmentally nurturant relationships for both youth and practitioners.

In addition, given that both researchers and participants share an investment in promoting youth thriving, there remains a potential for confirmation bias in how practitioner experiences were interpreted (Nickerson, 1998). Although coding discussions and team-based reflection helped promote awareness of how interpretations were shaped, we acknowledge that participants' roles and our shared commitment to PYD may have influenced interpretations (Braun & Clarke, 2021). As in other phenomenological research, complete bracketing of researchers' perspectives is not fully attainable (Heidegger, 1962). Whereas we engaged in iterative coding discussions to differentiate participants' voices from our own theoretical expectations, it is possible that our prior familiarity with models of PYD informed the way we recognized and emphasized certain relational dynamics in the data.

Although the qualitative approach provides rich insights into practitioners' perspectives, future research may also benefit from incorporating quantitative methods to assess the broader impact of Thanda practices on youth outcomes. For instance, longitudinal studies should explore the long-term effects of these relationships on children's development. For example, an ongoing quantitative study conducted with a sample of Thanda-enrolled youth (Abbasi-Asl et al., 2025) demonstrated person-specific differences in the developmental trajectories of character strengths (i.e., generosity and curiosity). More research like this study is warranted.

In alignment with RDS-based theories, individuals uniquely coact with their contexts, resulting in specificity in development (Abbasi-Asl et al., 2025; Bornstein, 2019; Elder et al., 2015; Parke & Elder, 2019). Given practitioners' descriptions of how they adapt their behaviors to meet the needs of individual youth, it is important to design longitudinal studies with densely repeated measures (i.e., intensive longitudinal designs) to investigate how developmentally nurturant relationships shape the specific development of specific character strengths of specific youth.

In addition, whereas RDS metatheory emphasizes the mutuality of developmentally nurturant relationships, the present study was intentionally focused on how practitioners describe fostering youth thriving through such relationships. Accordingly, our findings primarily reflected positive outcomes for youth, as described by practitioners. Future research may build on this work by examining whether and how engagement in developmentally nurturant relationships contributes to practitioners' professional growth, well-being, or relational skills. Such work may provide a more comprehensive understanding of the reciprocal relationships between youth and program practitioners.

Finally, many Thanda practitioners noted how their relationships with children and the skills that they seek to foster among children diverge from existing social and cultural norms (e.g., encouraging open conversations in which children can share their problems, ask questions, and freely speak their minds). Such a contrast points to the need to study youth programming within a dynamic systems perspective (Lerner, 2021; Lerner et al., 2011). Understanding how developmentally nurturant youth-adult relationships relate to children's positive development is inextricable from their context outside of the program. Scholars such as Durlak and colleagues (2007) and Catalano et al. (2002) have noted that, beyond learning skills within a PYD program, children require opportunities to practice and generalize these skills within their homes and communities.

To optimize youth development, environments outside of youth programming need to be supportive of such skill-building. Thus, PYD programs such as Thanda must not only strive to promote the growth of individual children, but also to change social systems (Durlak et al., 2007). As described above, Thanda embodies a holistic, community-based approach by also working with households and neighborhoods (e.g., the Home Visiting program and community learning circles). Accordingly, further research is needed to understand if and how children are perceiving the disconnect noted by practitioners between Thanda and their home and neighborhood contexts, and how it may be impacting their development. We therefore also recommend that future research explore the impact of Thanda's household and community programming on social change within their community.

Conclusions

By using the Big Three features of effective PYD programs as a conceptual frame, we seek to contribute to understanding program practitioners' perspectives on and approaches to fostering developmentally nurturant relationships with youth. In rural South Africa, where poverty along with cultural and generational norms may hinder relationships and marginalize opportunities for thriving, practitioners in Thanda emphasized fostering positive relationships with children by seeking to relate to them, to model positive behavior, and to listen to, support, and guide them. A sense of belonging was also prioritized, creating safe spaces for expression and exploration. Last, Thanda participants were given opportunities to contribute to and lead program activities to support the development of curiosity, generosity, and self-esteem as strengths that promote PYD and thriving. Although more research is needed to describe, explain, and optimize developmentally nurturant youth-adult relationships toward thriving, the evidence produced through this researcher-practitioner partnership may serve to advance understanding and to model how future studies might pursue ecologically valid insights from exemplary PYD programs.

References

- Abbasi-Asl, R., Keces, N., Lerner, R. M., Mackin, M., Yu, D., Dowling, E. M., Tirrell, J. M., Hasse, A., Olander, K., Larkan, A., Mashita, C., Msimango, R., Mkhithi, S., & Howard, T. (2025). Nomothetic, differential, and idiographic assessment of character development among South African youth. *Child and Youth Care Forum*, 54, 1203-1234. <https://doi.org/10.1007/s10566-025-09856-6>
- Alberts, A. E., Christiansen, E. D., Chase, P., Naudeau, S., Phelps, E., & Lerner, R. M. (2006). Qualitative and quantitative assessments of thriving and contribution in early adolescence: Findings from the 4-H study of Positive Youth Development. *Journal of Youth Development*, 1(2), 20. <https://jyd.pitt.edu/ojs/jyd/article/view/383>
- Allen, T. D., Day, R., & Lentz, E. (2005). The role of interpersonal comfort in mentoring relationships. *Journal of Career Development*, 31(3), 155-169. <https://doi.org/10.1007/s10871-004-2224-3>
- Allen, T. D., & Eby, L. T. (2004). Factors related to mentor reports of mentoring functions provided: Gender and relational characteristics. *Sex Roles*, 50(1-2), 129-139. <https://doi.org/10.1023/B:SERS.0000011078.48570.25>
- Alvarado, G., Skinner, M., Plaut, D., Moss, C., Kapungu, C., & Reavley, N. (2017, April). *A systematic review of positive youth development programs in low- and middle-income countries*. YouthPower Learning, Making Cents International. <https://www.icrw.org/publications/systematic-review-pyd-low-mid-income-countries/>
- Banati, P., Dowling, E. M., Jones, N., Madi, K., & Malachowska, A. (2024). International development agencies and their emerging role in adolescence character development: Reflections and opportunities. In M. D. Matthews & R. M. Lerner (Eds.), *The Routledge international handbook of multidisciplinary perspectives on character development*, Vol. II: Moderators, threats, and contexts (pp. 423-443). Routledge. [www.doi.org/10.4324/9781003252450-26](https://doi.org/10.4324/9781003252450-26)
- Bates, S., Anderson-Butcher, D., Ferrari, T., & Clary, C. (2020). A comparative examination of how program design components influence youth leadership-skill development. *Journal of Youth Development*, 15(6), 91-115. <https://doi.org/10.5195/jyd.2020.868>
- Benson, P. L., Scales, P. C., Hamilton, S. F., & Sesma, A., Jr. (2006). Positive youth development: Theory, research, and applications. In R. M. Lerner, & W. Damon, (Eds.), *Handbook of child psychology* (6th ed.): Vol. 1, *Theoretical models of human development* (pp. 894-941). John Wiley & Sons, Inc.
- Bergen, N., & Labonté, R. (2020). "Everything is perfect, and we have no problems": Detecting and limiting social desirability bias in qualitative research. *Qualitative Health Research*, 30(5), 783-792. <https://doi.org/10.1177/1049732319889354>
- Bornstein, M. H. (2015). Children's parents. In R. M. Lerner (Ed.), *Handbook of child psychology and developmental science*, Vol. 4. *Ecological settings and processes* (7th ed., pp. 55-132). John Wiley & Sons. [www.doi.org/10.1002/9781118963418.childpsy403](https://doi.org/10.1002/9781118963418.childpsy403)
- Bornstein, M. H. (2019). Fostering optimal development and averting detrimental development: Prescriptions, proscriptions, and specificity. *Applied Developmental Science*, 23(4), 340-345. <https://doi.org/10.1080/10888691.2017.1421424>
- Bornstein, M. H., Cluver, L., Deater-Deckard, K., Hill, N. E., Jager, J., Krutikova, S., Lerner, R. M., & Yoshikawa, H. (2022). The future of parenting programs: I design. *Parenting: Science and Practice*, 22(3), 201-234. <https://doi.org/10.1080/15295192.>

[2022.2087040](#)

- Bowers, E. P., Geldhof, G. J., Schmid, K. L., Napolitano, C. M., Minor, K., & Lerner, J. V. (2012). Relationships with important nonparental adults and positive youth development: An examination of youth self-regulatory strengths as mediators. *Research in Human Development*, 9(4), 298–316. <https://doi.org/10.1080/15427609.2012.729911>
- Bowers, E. P., Johnson, S. K., Warren, D. J. A., Tirrell, J. M., & Lerner, J. V. (2015). Youth-adult relationships and positive youth development. In E. P. Bowers, G. J. Geldhof, S. K. Johnson, L. J. Hilliard, R. M. Hershberg, J. V. Lerner, & R. M. Lerner (Eds.), *Promoting positive youth development: Lessons from the 4-H Study* (pp. 97–120). Springer. https://doi.org/10.1007/978-3-319-17166-1_6
- Braun, V., & Clarke, V. (2021). *Thematic analysis: A practical guide*. Sage.
- Bronfenbrenner, U., & Morris, P. A. (2006). The bioecological model of human development. In W. Damon & R. M. Lerner (Series Eds.) & R. M. Lerner (Vol. Ed.), *Handbook of child psychology: Vol. 1. Theoretical models of human development* (6th ed., pp. 793–828). John Wiley & Sons.
- Burke, R. J., McKeen, C. A., & McKenna, C. (1993). Correlates of mentoring in organizations: The mentor's perspective. *Psychological Reports*, 72(3), 883–896. <https://doi.org/10.2466/pr0.1993.72.3.883>
- Campbell, C. (1994). Intergenerational conflict in township families: Transforming notions of “respect” and changing power relations. *Southern African Journal of Gerontology*, 3(2), 37–42. www.doi.org/10.21504/SAJG.V3I2.46
- Cantor, P., Lerner, R. M., Pittman, K. J., Chase, P. A., & Gomperts, N. (2021). *Whole-child development, learning, and thriving: A dynamic systems approach*. Cambridge University Press. <https://doi.org/10.1017/9781108954600>
- Cantor, P., & Osher, D. (Eds.). (2021). *The science of learning and development: Enhancing the lives of all young people*. Routledge. <https://doi.org/10.4324/9781003038016>
- Catalano, R. F., Berglund, M. L., Ryan, J. A. M., Lonczak, H. S., & Hawkins, J. D. (2002). Positive youth development in the United States: Research findings on evaluations of positive youth development programs. *Prevention & Treatment*, 5(1), Article 15. <https://doi.org/10.1037/1522-3736.5.1.515a>
- Chowa, G., Masa, R., Manzanares, M., & Bilotta, N. (2023). A scoping review of positive youth development programming for vulnerable and marginalized youth in low- and middle-income countries. *Children and Youth Services Review*, 154, Article 107110. <https://doi.org/10.1016/j.childyouth.2023.107110>
- Cole, S. W. (2014). Human social genomics. *PLOS Genetics*, 10(8), Article e1004601. <https://doi.org/10.1371/journal.pgen.1004601>
- Cooper, K. S., & Minness, A. (2014). The co-creation of caring student-teacher relationships: Does teacher understanding matter? *The High School Journal* 97(4), 264–290. <https://muse.jhu.edu/article/546330>
- Creswell, J. W., & Poth, C. N. (2018). *Qualitative inquiry and research design: Choosing among five approaches* (4th ed.). SAGE.
- Draper, C. E., & Coalter, F. (2016). “There’s just something about this club. It’s been my family.” An analysis of the experiences of youth in a South African sport-for-development programme. *International Review for the Sociology of Sport*, 51(1), 44–60. <https://doi.org/10.1177/1012690213513783>
- DuBois, D. L., & Silverthorn, N. (2005a). Characteristics of natural mentoring relationships and adolescent adjustment: Evidence from a national study. *Journal of Primary Prevention*, 26, 69–92. <https://doi.org/10.1007/s10935-005-1832-4>
- DuBois, D. L., & Silverthorn, N. (2005b). Natural mentoring relationships and adolescent health: Evidence from a national study. *American Journal of Public Health*, 95, 518–524. <https://doi.org/10.2105/AJPH.2003.031476>
- Durlak, J. A., Taylor, R. D., Kawashima, K., Pachan, M. K., DuPre, E. P., Celio, C. I., Berger, S. R., Dymnicki, A. B., & Weissberg, R. P. (2007). Effects of positive youth development programs on school, family, and community systems. *American Journal of Community Psychology*, 39(3–4), 269–286. <https://doi.org/10.1007/s10464-007-9112-5>
- Eccles, J., & Gootman, J. A. (Eds.). (2002). *Community programs to promote youth development*. The National Academies Press. <http://www.nap.edu/catalog/10022>
- Elder, G. H., Jr., Shanahan, M. J., & Jennings, J. A. (2015). Human development in time and place. In M. H. Bornstein, T. Leventhal, & R. M. Lerner (Eds.), *Handbook of child psychology and developmental science, vol. 4: Ecological settings and processes in developmental systems* (7th ed., pp. 6–54). John Wiley & Sons. <https://doi.org/10.1002/9781118963418.childpsy402>
- Evans, G. W., & Kim, P. (2007). Childhood poverty and health: Cumulative risk exposure and stress dysregulation. *Psychological Science*, 18(11), 953–957. <https://doi.org/10.1111/j.1467-9280.2007.02008.x>
- Flaxman, E., Ascher, C., & Harrington, C. (1988, December). *Youth mentoring: Programs and practices (Report ED 308 257)*. Teachers College, Institute for Urban and Minority Education. <https://files.eric.ed.gov/fulltext/ED308257.pdf>
- Flouri, E., & Buchanan, A. (2004). Early father’s and mother’s involvement and child’s later educational outcomes. *British Jour-*

- nal of Educational Psychology*, 74(2), 141–153. <https://doi.org/10.1348/000709904773839806>
- Gottlieb, G. (1998). Normally occurring environmental and behavioral influences on gene activity: From central dogma to probabilistic epigenesis. *Psychological Review*, 105(4), 792–802. <https://doi.org/10.1037/0033-295X.105.4.792-802>
- Greenberger, E., Chen, C., & Beam, M. R. (1998). The role of “very important” nonparental adults in adolescent development. *Journal of Youth and Adolescence*, 27(3), 321–343. <https://doi.org/10.1023/A:1022803120166>
- Hall, K., Sambu, W., Berry, L., Giese, S., Almelch, C., & Rosa, S. (2016). *South African Early Childhood Review 2016*. Children’s Institute, University of Cape Town, and Ilifa Labantwana. <https://bettercarenetwork.org/sites/default/files/South%20African%20Early%20Childhood%20Review%202016.pdf>
- Hay, S., Tirrell, J. M., Lerner, J. V., Dowling, E. M., Sim, A. T. R., King, P. E., Vaughn, J. M., Iraheta, G., & Lerner, R. M. (2024). “We are protected”: Examining youth perceptions of safety within a faith-based positive youth development program in El Salvador. *Journal of Youth Development*, 19(1), Article 3. <https://tigerprints.clemson.edu/jyd/vol19/iss1/3>
- Heidegger, M. (2010). *Being and time*. SUNY press.
- Hershberg, R. M., Chase, P. A., Champine, R. B., Hilliard, L. J., Wang, J., & Lerner, R. M. (2015). “You can quit me but I’m not going to quit you.” A focus group study of leaders’ perceptions of their positive influences on youth in Boy Scouts of America. *Journal of Youth Development*, 10(2), 5–30. <https://doi.org/10.5195/jyd.2015.406>
- Hsieh, H.-F., & Shannon, S. E. (2005). Three approaches to qualitative content analysis. *Qualitative Health Research*, 15(9), 1277–1288. <https://doi.org/10.1177/1049732305276687>
- Jablonka, E., & Lamb, M. (2005). *Evolution in four dimensions: Genetic, epigenetic, behavioral, and symbolic variation in the history of life*. MIT Press.
- Johanson, D. C., & Edey, M. A. (1981). *Lucy: The beginnings of humankind*. Simon & Schuster.
- King, P. E., Dowling, E. M., Mueller, R. A., White, K., Schultz, W., Osborn, P., Dickerson, E., Bobek, D. L., Lerner, R. M., Benson, P. L., & Scales, P. C. (2005). Thriving in adolescence: The voices of youth-serving practitioners, parents, and early and late adolescents. *Journal of Early Adolescence*, 25(1), 94–112. <https://doi.org/10.1177/0272431604272459>
- Larson, R. W., & Walker, K. C. (2010). Dilemmas of practice: Challenges to program quality encountered by youth program leaders. *American Journal of Community Psychology*, 45(3–4), 338–349. <https://doi.org/10.1007/s10464-010-9307-z>
- Laursen, B., & Collins, W. A. (2009). Parent-child relationships during adolescence. In R. M. Lerner & L. Steinberg (Eds.), *Handbook of adolescent psychology* (3rd ed., pp. 3–42). John Wiley & Sons, Inc. <https://doi.org/10.1002/9780470479193.adlpsy002002>
- Lerner, R. M. (2004). *Liberty: Thriving and civic engagement among America’s youth*. SAGE Publications.
- Lerner, R. M. (2018a). *Concepts and theories of human development* (4th ed.). Routledge. <https://doi.org/10.4324/9780203581629>
- Lerner, R. M. (2018b). Character development among youth: Linking lives in time and place. *International Journal of Behavioral Development*, 42(2), 267–277. <https://doi.org/10.1177/0165025417711057>
- Lerner, R. M. (2021). *Individuals as producers of their development: The dynamics of person-context coactions*. Routledge.
- Lerner, R. M. (2024). On being human: Developmentally-nurturant relationships in dynamic systems. In V. Paglia & R. Pegoraro (Eds.), *Human: Meanings and challenges. Proceedings of the XXIX General Assembly of Members* (pp.145–169). Pontifical Academy for Life.
- Lerner, R. M., & Callina, K. S. (2014). The study of character development: Towards tests of a relational developmental systems model. *Human Development*, 57(6), 322–346. <https://doi.org/10.1159/000368784>
- Lerner, R. M., King, P. E., Dowling, E. M., & Bowers, E. P. (2025). On being and becoming human through accompaniment and telos: Ontological convergences between Christian anthropology and the science of human development. *Journal of Psychology and Theology*, 53(1), 85–107. <https://doi.org/10.1177/00916471241300154>
- Lerner, R. M., Lerner, J. V., Almerigi, J. B., Theokas, C., Phelps, E., Gestsdottir, S., Naudeau, S., Jelicic, H., Alberts, A., Ma, L., Smith, L. M., Bobek, D. L., Richman-Raphael, D., Simpson, I., Christiansen, E. D., & von Eye, A. (2005). Positive youth development, participation in community youth development programs, and community contributions of fifth-grade adolescents: Findings from the first wave of the 4-H Development. *The Journal of Early Adolescence*, 25(1), 17–71. <https://doi.org/10.1177/0272431604272461>
- Lerner, R. M., Lerner, J. V., Bowers, E., & Geldhof, G. J. (2015). Positive youth development and relational-developmental-systems. In W. F. Overton & P. C. Molenaar (Eds.); R. M. Lerner (Editor-in-chief), *Handbook of child psychology and developmental science, Vol. 1: Theory and method* (7th ed., pp. 607–651). Wiley. <https://doi.org/10.1002/9781118963418.childpsy116>
- Lerner, R. M., Lerner, J. V., Geldhof, G. J., Gestsdóttir, S., King, P. E., Sim, A. T. R., Batanova, M., Tirrell, J. M., & Dowling, E.

- M. (2018). Studying positive youth development in different nations: Theoretical and methodological issues. In J. E. Lansford & P. Banati (Eds.), *Handbook on adolescent development research and its impact on global policy* (pp. 63–68). Oxford University Press. [www.doi.org/10.1093/oso/9780190847128.003.0004](https://doi.org/10.1093/oso/9780190847128.003.0004)
- Lerner, R. M., Lerner, J. V., Lewin-Bizan, S., Bowers, E. P., Boyd, M. J., Mueller, M. K., Bowers, E. P., Boyd, M. J., Mueller, M. K., Schmid, K. L., & Napolitano, C. M. (2011). Positive youth development: Processes, programs, and problematics. *Journal of Youth Development*, 6(3), 38–62. <https://doi.org/10.5195/jyd.2011.174>
- Lerner, R. M., Tirrell, J. M., Gansert, P. K., Lerner, J. V., King, P. E., Geldhof, G. J., Dowling, E. M., & Sim, A. T. R. (2021). Longitudinal research about, and program evaluations of, positive youth development in low- and middle-income countries: Methodological issues and options. *Journal of Youth Development*, 16(2-3), 100–123. <https://doi.org/10.5195/jyd.2021.1040>
- Lerner, R. M., Tirrell, J. M., Dowling, E. M., Geldhof, G. J., Gestsdottir, S., Lerner, J. V., King, P. E., Williams, K., Iraheta, G., & Sim, A. T. R. (2019). The end of the beginning: Evidence and absences studying positive youth development in a global context. *Adolescent Research Review*, 4(1), 1–14. <https://doi.org/10.1007/s40894-018-0093-4>
- Levitt, H. M., Bamberg, M., Creswell, J. W., Frost, D. M., Josselson, R., & Suárez-Orozco, C. (2018). Journal article reporting standards for qualitative primary, qualitative meta-analytic, and mixed methods research in psychology: The APA Publications and Communications Board task force report. *American Psychologist*, 73(1), 26–46. <https://doi.org/10.1037/amp0000151>
- Lewin-Bizan, S., Bowers, E. P., & Lerner, R. M. (2010). One good thing leads to another: Cascades of positive youth development among American adolescents. *Development and Psychopathology*, 22(4), 759–770. <https://doi.org/10.1017/S0954579410000441>
- Lunsford, L. G. (2016). Mentors as friends. In M. Hojjat & A. Moyer (Eds.), *The psychology of friendship* (pp. 141–156). Oxford University Press. <https://doi.org/10.1093/acprof:oso/9780190222024.003.0009>
- Lupien, S. J., King, S., Meaney, M. J., & McEwen, B. S. (2001). Can poverty get under your skin? Basal cortisol levels and cognitive function in children from low and high socioeconomic status. *Development and Psychopathology*, 13(3), 653–676. <https://doi.org/10.1017/s0954579401003133>
- Makhonza, L. O., Kehinde, C. L., & Nkoane, M. M. (2019). Polygonal Ubuntu/Botho as a superlative value to embrace orphans and vulnerable children in schools. *Gender and Behavior*, 17(3), 13522–13530. <https://www.ajol.info/index.php/gab/article/view/191238>
- Marcus, R., Gupta-Archer, N., Darcy, M., & Page, E. (2017). GAGE rigorous review: Girls' clubs, life skills programmes and girls' well-being outcomes. GAGE. <https://www.gage.odi.org/publication/rigorous-review-girls-clubs-life-skills-programmes/>
- Mascolo, M. F., & Bidell, T. R. (Eds.). (2020). *Handbook of integrative developmental science: Essays in honor of Kurt W. Fischer*. Routledge/Taylor & Francis Group. <https://doi.org/10.4324/9781003018599>
- Mascolo, M. F., & Fischer, K. W. (2015). Dynamic development of thinking, feeling, and acting. In W. F. Overton, P. C. M. Molenaar, & R. M. Lerner (Eds.), *Handbook of child psychology and developmental science, Vol. 1: Theory and method* (pp. 113–161). John Wiley & Sons, Inc. <https://doi.org/10.1002/9781118963418.childpsy104>
- Maxwell, J. A. (2010). Using numbers in qualitative research. *Qualitative Inquiry*, 16(6), 475–482. <https://doi.org/10.1177/1077800410364740>
- Miles, M. B., & Huberman, A. M. (1994). *Qualitative data analysis: An expanded sourcebook* (2nd ed.). Sage.
- Municipalities of South Africa. (n.d.). Umzumbe local municipality (KZN213). Yes Media. <https://municipalities.co.za/demo-graphic/1083/umzumbe-local-municipality>
- National Academies of Sciences, Engineering, and Medicine. (2025). *The future of youth development: Building systems and strengthening programs*. The National Academies Press. <https://doi.org/10.17226/27833>
- Nickerson, R. S. (1998). Confirmation bias: A ubiquitous phenomenon in many guises. *Review of General Psychology*, 2(2), 175–220. <https://doi.org/10.1037/1089-2680.2.2.175>
- Nucci, L. (2024). The development of morality and the character system: Implications for the notion of virtue. In M. D. Matthews & R. M. Lerner (Eds.), *The Routledge international handbook of multidisciplinary perspectives on character development, Vol. I: Conceptualizing and defining character* (pp. 550–568). Routledge. <https://doi.org/10.4324/9781003251248-30>
- Overton, W. F. (2015). Processes, relations and relational-developmental-systems. In R. M. Lerner, W. F. Overton, & P. C. Molenaar (Eds.), *Handbook of child psychology and developmental science, Vol. 1: Theory and method* (7th ed., pp. 9–62). John Wiley & Sons. <https://doi.org/10.1002/9781118963418.childpsy102>
- Page, D. T., Hanrahan, S., & Buckley, L. (2023). Real-world trial of positive youth development program “LifeMatters” with South African adolescents in a low-resource setting. *Children and Youth Services Review*, 146, Article 106818. <https://doi.org/10.1016/j.childyouth.2023.106818>
- Parke, R. D., & Elder, G. H., Jr. (Eds.). (2019). *Children in changing worlds*. Cambridge University Press.

- Patel, M., Mohammed, T. A. S., & Koen, R. (2024). Ubuntu in post-apartheid South Africa: Educational, cultural and philosophical considerations. *Philosophies*, 9(1), Article 21. <https://doi.org/10.3390/philosophies9010021>
- Raeff, C. (2016). *Exploring the dynamics of human development: An integrative approach*. Oxford University Press.
- Raeff, C. (2020). *Exploring the complexities of human action*. Oxford University Press. <https://doi.org/10.1093/oso/9780190050436.001.0001>
- Ragins, B. R., & Cotton, J. L. (1993). Gender and willingness to mentor in organizations. *Journal of Management*, 19(1), 97-111. <https://doi.org/10.1177/014920639301900107>
- Rhodes, J. E., & Lowe, S. R. (2009). Mentoring in adolescence. In R. M. Lerner & L. Steinberg (Eds.), *Handbook of adolescent psychology: Contextual influences on adolescent development*, Vol. 2 (3rd ed., pp. 152–190). John Wiley & Sons, Inc. <https://doi.org/10.1002/9780470479193.adlpsy002006>
- Ritchie, K. L., & Holden, G. W. (1998). Parenting stress in low income battered and community women: Effects on parenting behavior. *Early Education and Development*, 9(1), 97-112. https://doi.org/10.1207/s15566935eed0901_5
- Rose, J., & Johnson, C. W. (2020). Contextualizing reliability and validity in qualitative research: Toward more rigorous and trustworthy qualitative social science in leisure research. *Journal of Leisure Research*, 51(4), 432-451. <https://doi.org/10.1080/00222216.2020.1722042>
- Roth, J. L., & Brooks-Gunn, J. (2003). What exactly is a youth development program? Answers from research and practice. *Applied Developmental Science*, 7(2), 94-111. https://doi.org/10.1207/S1532480XADS0702_6
- Roth, J. L., & Brooks-Gunn, J. (2016). Evaluating youth development programs: Progress and promise. *Applied Developmental Science*, 20(3), 188–202. <https://doi.org/10.1080/10888691.2015.1113879>
- Scales, P. C., & Roehlkepartain, E. C. (2018). The contribution of nonfamily adults to adolescent well-being: A global research and policy perspectives. In J. E. Lansford & P. Banati (Eds.), *Handbook of adolescent development research and its impact on global policy* (pp. 150–172). Oxford University Press.
- Schaie, K. W., & Strother, C. R. (1968). A cross-sequential study of age changes in cognitive behavior. *Psychological Bulletin*, 70(6, Pt.1), 671–680. <https://doi.org/10.1037/h0026811>
- Sosik, J. J., & Godshalk, V. M. (2000). The role of gender in mentoring: Implications for diversified and homogenous mentoring relationships. *Journal of Vocational Behavior*, 57(1), 102–122. <https://doi.org/10.1006/jvbe.1999.1734>
- Siegler, I. C., & Botwinick, J. (1979). A long-term longitudinal study of intellectual ability of older adults: The matter of selective subject attrition. *Journal of Gerontology*, 34(2), 242–245. <https://doi.org/10.1093/geronj/34.2.242>
- Slavich, G. M., & Cole, S. W. (2013). The emerging field of human social genomics. *Clinical Psychological Science*, 1(3), 331-348. <https://doi.org/10.1177/2167702613478594>
- Statistics South Africa. (2011). *South African population census 2011*. Statistics South Africa, Republic of South Africa. <https://census.statssa.gov.za/#/province/5/2>
- Statistics South Africa. (2016). *Community survey 2016*. Statistics South Africa, Republic of South Africa. <https://wazimap.co.za/profiles/municipality-KZN213-umzumbe/>
- Statistics South Africa. (2022). *Key statistics: Municipality – Umzumbe*. Statistics South Africa, Republic of South Africa. <https://census.statssa.gov.za/#/province/5/2>
- Struthers, N. J. (1995). Differences in mentoring: A function of gender or organizational rank? *Journal of Social Behavior & Personality*, 10(6), 265–272.
- Thanda. (n.d.a). *Child & youth development*. <https://thanda.org/child-youth-development/>
- Thanda. (n.d.b). *Home*. <https://thanda.org/>
- Thanda. (2021). *Internal surveys and observation of programme participants*. [Unpublished report]. Thanda
- Theokas, C., & Lerner, R. M. (2006). Observed ecological assets in families, schools, and neighborhoods: Conceptualization, measurement, and relations with positive and negative developmental outcomes. *Applied Developmental Science*, 10(2), 61–74. https://doi.org/10.1207/s1532480xads1002_2
- Theron, L. C. (2016). Toward a culturally and contextually sensitive understanding of resilience: Privileging the voices of Black, South African young people. *Journal of Adolescent Research*, 31(6), 635–670. <https://doi.org/10.1177/0743558415600072>
- Tirrell, J. M., Dowling, E. M., Gansert, P., Buckingham, M., Wong, C. A., Suzuki, S., Naliaka, C., Kibbedi, P., Namurinda, E., Williams, K., Geldhof, G. J., Lerner, J. V., King, P. E., Sim, A. T. R., & Lerner, R. M. (2020). Toward a measure for assessing features of effective youth development programs: Contextual safety and the “Big Three” components of positive youth development programs in Rwanda. *Child & Youth Care Forum*, 49(2), 201-222. <https://doi.org/10.1007/s10566-019-09524-6>
- Tirrell, J. M., Dowling, E. M., Kibbedi, P., Namurinda, E., Iraheta, G., Dennis, J., Malvese, K., Abbasi-Asl, R., Williams, K.,

- Lerner, J. V., King, P. E., Sim, A. T. R., & Lerner, R. M. (2023). Measuring youth perceptions of being known and loved and positive youth development: Cross-national findings from Rwanda and El Salvador. *Child & Youth Care Forum*, 52, 1093-1119. <https://doi.org/10.1007/s10566-022-09725-6>
- Tirrell, J. M., Hay, S. W., Gansert, P. K., Le, T. U., O'Neil, B. C., Vaughn, J. M., Bishara, L., Tan, E., Lerner, J. V., King, P. E., Downing, E. M., Williams, K., Iraheta, G., Sim, A. T. R., & Lerner, R. M. (2021). Exploring the role of the “Big Three” features of effective youth development programs in El Salvador: The sample case of programs of Compassion International. *International Journal of Behavioral Development*, 45(6), 524-532. <https://doi.org/10.1177/01650254211022858>
- Tobach, E., & Schneirla, T. C. (1968). The biopsychology of social behavior of animals. In R. E. Cooke & S. Levin (Eds.), *Biologic basis of pediatric practice* (pp. 68-82). McGraw-Hill.
- Udeh, C. A., Daraojimba, R. E., Odulaja, B. A., Afolabi, J. O. A., Ogedengbe, D. E., & James, O. O. (2023). Youth empowerment in Africa: Lessons for U.S. youth development programs. *World Journal of Advanced Research and Reviews*, 21(01), 1942-1958. <https://doi.org/10.30574/wjarr.2024.21.1.2479>
- Witherington, D. C., & Lickliter, R. (2016). Integrating development and evolution in psychological science: Evolutionary developmental psychology, developmental systems, and explanatory pluralism. *Human Development*, 59(4), 200-234. <https://doi.org/10.1159/000450715>
- Zimmerman, M. A., Bingenheimer, J. B., & Notaro, P. C. (2002). Natural mentors and adolescent resiliency: A study with urban youth. *American Journal of Community Psychology*, 30(2), 221-243. <https://doi.org/10.1023/A:1014632911622>

Appendix

Qualitative Interview Protocol

Purpose

The goals of the qualitative interviews are to develop a deeper understanding of the role of Thanda staff in developing and sustaining nurturing relationships with the children in the Thanda program and the degree to which they believe relationships between staff and children in the Thanda program impact the healthy development of Thanda children and the development of their character, including virtues such as generosity, curiosity, and a sense of belonging.

We aim to conduct interviews with Thanda leadership, Thanda educators, and members of the Home Visiting staff. The total sample size will be 21 participants (i.e., 7 people in each group). Thanda currently has over 300 staff members working for them. Those selected to participate in the interviews will include staff members with more than one year of experience working for the organization and/or more than two years of experience living in the community. The sample will include both male and female employees.

Interviews will be 20 minutes each and will take place in late January or early February 2024. Thanda leadership will select the staff members that will participate in the interviews, which will be led by two members of the IARYD research team (Drs. Jonathan Tirrell and Elizabeth Dowling). Interviews will take place in a Thanda classroom, where confidentiality can be assured. Participants will have the option to not respond to a question and/or leave the interview at any time.

Questions in the interviews will include:

- What is your role at Thanda?
- What are the main activities related to your role (as a member of the staff, teacher, or home visitor)?
- How many hours a day/week do you interact directly with children at Thanda?
- What are the most important things you do in your job related to building nurturing relationships with the children in Thanda?
- How would you describe the quality of your relationships with the children at Thanda?
- How can you tell you are having this kind of an impact on the children?
- How do you think children at Thanda feel about you? What are some things you do to help the children feel that way about you?
- What, if anything, makes it hard for you to build positive relationships with the children? How about for other staff, teachers, or home visitors?
- What do you think it means for children to have nurturing relationships with adults? How does it make the child feel to experience a nurturing relationship with an adult and what might the adult do to make the child feel that way?
- How has Thanda helped you in your understanding of the value for children in having nurturing relationships with adults? What type of training have you received?
- How would you describe the overall quality of the relationships between children at Thanda and the other staff/teachers/home visitors?
- What do you do that is most effective/important in developing nurturing relationships with children at Thanda? Other staff/teachers/home visitors?
- In what ways do you think you and your relationships with the children at Thanda impact their growing sense of generosity? Their curiosity? Their sense of belonging? etc
- In what ways do you think the relationships the other staff/teachers/home visitors have with the children impact their growing sense of
- In what ways do you think you and your relationships with the children impact their overall physical health? Their mental health?

- In what ways do you think the relationships the other staff/teachers/home visitors have with the children impact their overall physical health? Their mental health?
- Because of the relationships with the teachers/staff/home visitors at Thanda, how are children in Thanda different from children who do not get exposed to Thanda's teachers/staff/home visitors?
- Do you see long term benefits in the lives of children who have been in Thanda, as a result of their relationships with Thanda staff/teachers/home visitors? If so, what are they?