

# Vocational Training and Agency Among Kenyan Youth

Acacia Nikoi

## Education as a Site of Agency

Development discourse champions the completion of primary and secondary schooling as necessary for an individual's future and for their community's well-being. These arguments are backed by evidence that shows that by achieving schooling benchmarks, children and youth are more likely to have access to formal employment, earn higher incomes, and make contributions to more robust labor markets (Tembon & Fort, 2008; Warner, Malhotra, & McGonagle, 2012). There are also significant benefits to families as health and well-being improve and the time to first pregnancy is more likely to be delayed among girls (Ozier, 2011; Warner et al., 2012). Within this discourse, empowerment and agency have been frequently linked with schooling (which takes place in formal settings and within formal structures) and education (which can be formal, but also non-formal or informal and takes many different forms), especially in relation to gender inequalities (Murphy-Graham, 2012; Stromquist, 2015). Warner et al. (2012) argue that it is the process of empowerment in the transition to adulthood that connects schooling with the economic and social benefits identified above. Stromquist (2015) further states that schooling is a critical factor in increasing youths' knowledge—one of four dimensions of empowerment that she identifies—that can lead to increased youth agency. Despite this, research suggests that not all schooling experiences lead to agentic youth (Bajaj, 2011; Chismaya, DeJaeghere, Kendall, & Khan, 2012) and schooling alone does not guarantee success in the economic sector (Allison et al., 2014; King, 2007; Ohba, 2011). Furthermore, Stromquist argues that non-formal education programs have been more successful than formal schooling at engendering empowerment and agency.

---

A. Nikoi (✉)

Department of Organizational Leadership, Policy and Development, University of Minnesota,  
Minneapolis, MN, USA

e-mail: [nikoi049@umn.edu](mailto:nikoi049@umn.edu)

With a global emphasis on providing schooling for all youth, the percentage of youth who are able to attain a basic or secondary education have increased in countries such as Kenya (Ministry of Education, 2012). Despite the fact that more youth are achieving benchmarks of schooling that are deemed necessary for them to engage in the workforce, many remain unable to do so (King & McGrath, 2012). To address this gap, vocational skills training and education through both governmental and non-governmental mechanisms have become increasingly popular. As these opportunities become more readily available and are presented as opportunities for youth empowerment, it is important to look at whether or not vocational training provides youth with the knowledge and skills they need to actively engage in different livelihood options, and in the process, if and how it contributes to developing youth agency.

In this chapter I explore how Kenyan youth who participated in a non-formal, vocational training program after completing their secondary education developed skills and knowledge and were able to utilize them in ways that demonstrated both individual and social agency. I begin this chapter by situating the study in the Kenyan education and employment sectors and introducing the site of study. I then examine the ways in which agency can be explored among urban Kenyan youth and in relation to their transition to adulthood. My discussion on methodology highlights how a longitudinal study helps us to understand the ways in which agency develops over time. Finally, I discuss the study findings that contribute to broader conceptualizations of agency and youth.

## **The Context of Education and Employment for Youth in Kenya**

For the past 25 years there has been a significant emphasis around the globe on promoting formal education, most prominently with primary or basic schooling but also with secondary schooling. The introduction of the Education for All (EFA) initiative and the Millennium Development Goals (MDG) spurred these efforts to ensure that basic education would be available to all children and youth, regardless of gender or socio-economic class. In response, countries have used considerable resources to bolster the educational systems in their countries. In Kenya, free primary education was introduced in 2003 and resulted in an additional two million students entering into the primary education system over the next 5 years (Ministry of Education, 2012). This expansion of the education system was followed in 2008 with the introduction of the Free Day Secondary Education Program (FDSEP) (Ministry of Education, 2011). Even though attending secondary school remained difficult for many youth and their families due to associated costs of schooling (i.e., the cost of uniforms and the opportunity costs of not working in order to go to school) (Ohba, 2011), the rates of secondary school enrollment increased from 32.4% to 45.3% from 2008 to 2011 (Ministry of Education, 2012). This increased

access to formal education provides youth with necessary credentials for finding employment or for continuing their education. However, youth and employers often view these schooling credentials as insufficient for providing the skills and knowledge that youth need to engage in the workforce.

Despite an increase in the number of youth who have been able to attain a formal education, concerns remain over the quality and relevancy of education, particularly in secondary schools. The rapid increase in enrollments has meant that schools are facing over-crowding, a shortage of teachers and a lack of resources, all of which have led to a decrease in the quality of education that youth receive (Oyaro, 2008). Coupled with declining quality, youth and parents have concerns over the relevancy of secondary schooling. Even after completing secondary school youth feel they do not have the skills and means to pursue desired employment opportunities (Ohba, 2011). Ohba's study on primary school leavers found relevancy of learning outcomes to be one of the factors that affected whether or not youth pursued secondary schooling. He states, "Although some [youth] valued the greater knowledge they might gain from secondary education, they were simultaneously concerned about what they would be able to do after they had finished school" (2011, p. 407). This gap in quality and relevancy of education results in questioning the value of education for youths' future livelihoods.

While the official, national unemployment rate is 10%, youth unemployment ranges between 15% and 35% depending on age; additionally, 70–80% of the unemployed population is below the age of 34 (Njonjo, 2010; UNDP, 2013). Youth unemployment rates are complicated by the fact that youth are not able to legally engage in formal employment until the age of 18 (Government of Kenya, 2010).<sup>1</sup> The majority of 15–16-year-old youth are still in school during this period and, therefore, they are not included in unemployment rates (UNDP, 2013). Within the broad range of youth, 18–20-year-olds have the highest unemployment rate at 35%. Rates of employment trend downward with age and 25% of 25 year olds are unemployed, while 15% of 30-year-olds face unemployment (UNDP, 2013).

In response to the employment challenges and the lack of quality and relevant education in preparing youth for the workforce, urban youth in sub-Saharan Africa seek to identify targeted non-formal education that will allow them to gain specific skills within a limited time period and in turn to start their own businesses (Sommers, 2007). Although the number of organizations that provide targeted non-formal education has increased over the past decade, the impact of non-formal educational programs that provide vocational training remains an under-studied area and little research has been done on the role of this type of education in fostering agency for youths' future livelihoods.

---

<sup>1</sup>The Kenyan constitution defines the stage of being a youth as being between the ages of 15 and 35 (Government of Kenya, 2010), but the life experiences and needs of youth within this broad category vary significantly.

## *Njia* as a Site of Study

The *Njia* Youth Empowerment Program (*Njia* YEP, referred to throughout as “*Njia*”)<sup>2</sup> is one organization that aims to address the gap between what youth learn in school and what they need to secure their livelihoods and achieve their career goals. Established in Kenya in 2010, *Njia* is a 4-month program that provides older youth (18–25) with basic employability skills in select vocational areas, introductory knowledge of entrepreneurship, work readiness skills and life skills. In addition to classroom teaching, the program uses hands-on learning experiences in entrepreneurship and technical areas, facilitates mentorship opportunities between business community members and youth, and places youth in attachments where they work with businesses in selected vocational fields for 1 month or more to learn about the field and further develop their skills. The attachment is frequently unpaid, though employers who choose to offer attachments longer than 1 month are required to provide a stipend or salary. Youth in this study participated in one of five vocational/technical fields that were regarded as meeting employer demands in the urban area of Nairobi: hospitality, customer relations and sales, automotive, electrical, and industrial garment manufacturing.

In keeping with the mission of *Njia*, youth who participate in the program are considered economically marginalized. Youth typically come from informal settlements or other low income areas and the majority of youth spend at least 1 year “idle” in which they were unable to engage in employment opportunities or to continue their education. At the same time, many youth defy other descriptors of marginalization. Most youth are not orphaned and have support, either financial or emotional, from family members. Furthermore, the majority of youth have completed secondary school, which requires access to financial resources or scholarships. In many ways these youths occupy an “in-between” space—they are neither the most marginalized in their communities nor are they the ones who are identified as leaders for the next generation. They are youth who have hopes and dreams for their future and anticipated that completion of secondary school would have provided them with the opportunities they needed to achieve those dreams. However, after spending at least 1 year after Form 4 (completion of secondary school in Kenya), being unemployed and unable to pursue further education, they entered the program expecting to gain the necessary skills to pursue their livelihoods. This chapter explores how after participating in the program, acquiring technical skills and developing new ways of thinking and perceiving themselves, youth demonstrated agency as they navigated economic opportunities and made decisions about their livelihoods and futures. In this process, I place youth agency within the social and economic environment in which the youth live and work, and discuss how these environments shape youth’s agency.

---

<sup>2</sup>Pseudonyms are used throughout for the organization and all individuals.

## Conceptualizing Agency and Empowerment

“Youth empowerment” has increasingly become part of the development lexicon. Throughout Africa, and in Kenya specifically, there have been strategic efforts to empower economically and socially marginalized youth through a variety of initiatives sponsored by governments, international organizations, international non-governmental organizations (NGO), and local NGOs. Frequently these initiatives emphasize the role of economic empowerment on youths’ lives and equate vocational training or job placement with empowerment (Betcherman, Godfrey, Puerto, Rother, & Stavreska, 2007; McGrath, 2012). However, the different ways in which empowerment might be experienced, how youth agentially enact their empowerment, and the multiple dimensions of youths’ lives that extend beyond their economic needs are frequently under-emphasized. It is against this backdrop of youth empowerment programming that this study on youth agency took place. This chapter positions agency within the process of empowerment (Kabeer, 1999; Murphy-Graham, 2012) and examines how youth who participated in non-formal, vocational training experienced agency. This study conceptualizes agency in three ways: (1) as a component of the process of empowerment, (2) as action that both impacts and is impacted by the individual and the social, and (3) as an act that is a part of everyday youth encounters and not just an extraordinary response to crisis conditions.

First, in this chapter I situate agency as a phenomenon that happens within the process of empowerment (Kabeer, 1999; Murphy-Graham, 2012). Kabeer (1999) identified agency as one of three inter-related dimensions of empowerment, including resources and achievements, and defined it as “the ability to define one’s goals and act upon them” (p. 438). Murphy-Graham’s (2012) framework extrapolated on this by demonstrating that the ability to act is influenced by changes in the ways one thinks and the development of new skills and knowledge. In her work with women’s educational initiatives in Honduras, Murphy-Graham identified three inter-related yet distinct dimensions of empowerment—recognition, capacity development and action. The recognition dimension encompassed new ways of thinking about oneself and others and was evidenced through increased self-confidence, self-awareness, and an open mind. Capacity development referred to critical thinking and a more technical or cognitive type of knowledge, while the action dimension spoke to the ways in which those skills and knowledge are put into practice. In this study, all three dimensions are present, beginning with the new ways youth think of themselves upon developing new skills through vocational training to relating the obtained skills and knowledge in their daily lives and goals for their future. Similar to Murphy-Graham’s study, this study demonstrates youth agency through the enactment of various types of knowledge, skills, and ways of thinking. The three dimensions presented by Murphy-Graham therefore provide one framework to understand how non-formal, vocational education can act as a catalyst in youth’s agency through the process of empowerment.

The second way in which this chapter conceptualizes agency is as socially embedded. While vocational skills training is primarily interested in giving youth

the tools necessary to secure certain types of employment, pursue additional schooling, and set new livelihoods goals, youth are not isolated as they engage in these actions. Rather, the goals they set and actions they take are informed by social norms, societal expectations, and family (and other's) needs (DeJaeghere, McCleary, & Josić, 2016). In a study of low-income youth in Botswana, Joseph (2012) identified "familial-belonging" as intricately linked to the agency and livelihood trajectories of the young women in his study. His findings suggest that the decisions youth made regarding their livelihoods were impacted by both the needs of those around them and the aspirations youth had for themselves and for others.

The final way in which agency is explored among these youths in Nairobi is through recognition of "everyday agency" (Payne, 2012). Payne introduced the notion of everyday agency in the context of child-headed households to counter discourses that describe children's and youth's agency as a response to a crisis or a situation that is inherently abnormal. Instead, she chose to view agency in these situations through the lenses of the children who saw their decisions and actions as a part of the normal, everyday life that they were living. Similarly, within a discourse where youth are often seen as either the "makers" or "breakers" (Honwana & De Boeck, 2005) or the "vandals" or "vanguards" (Abbinck & van Kessel, 2005) of society, the notion of everyday agency removes the stigma of a crisis situation and the pressure of becoming the heroes through broader social change. The concept of everyday agency recognizes that agency is not always a conscious action that youth take in response to a perceived injustice, nor does it necessarily take the form of active social change. Rather, everyday agency acknowledges that youth "view their actions as a part of their everyday life rather than as being constrained or viewing them through a 'coping lens'" (Payne, 2012, p. 403). While there were instances in which youth did act agentially in crisis situations such as a family member's illness or sudden death, the vast majority of decisions and actions that youth took happened in the everyday.

## Methodology

This chapter draws on qualitative findings from longitudinal interview data that were gathered over a period of 4 years (2012–2015) with youth who participated in the *Njia* program.<sup>3</sup> The first interviews in 2012 were conducted with 64 youth from two cohorts of 162 youth as they completed the program and were engaged in or had just ended their attachment. Thirty of the youth participated in the Taharuki site,

---

<sup>3</sup>This study is a secondary analysis of interview data that was collected as part of a larger, 6-year evaluation of three entrepreneurship programs in Kenya, Tanzania, and Uganda, conducted by the University of Minnesota (UMN) and funded by the MasterCard Foundation. David Chapman and Joan DeJaeghere served as principal investigators and a team of 28 UMN faculty, staff, and graduate students and Kenyan researchers conducted interviews, and collected spoken survey and demographic data between 2012 and 2015. The author served as the lead project fellow for qualitative data collection in Kenya during that time period.

located in the center of Nairobi serving lower-income communities and 34 had participated in the Sukumiza site, in a peri-urban industrial area that serves a transit community. There were 33 males and 31 females. Follow-up interviews with these same youth were then conducted each subsequent year for the next 3 years. Although the sample size fluctuated between 64 and 46 youth each year, 34 youth were interviewed all 4 years. As a longitudinal study, sample attrition was anticipated and most attrition was due to youth movement away from the project site, unavailability of youth due to their long working hours or inflexible schedules or, in some instances, personal or family illnesses at the time the interviews were conducted.

Interviews were conducted by teams of researchers, including the author, from the United States and Kenya and were conducted in English, Swahili, or Sheng—a mix of Swahili, English, and other Kenyan languages. The ability of the team to use English, Swahili, and Sheng often put youth at ease and encouraged them to tell us their successes and challenges. Interviews with NGO staff and stakeholders provided additional information about the context in which youth live, work, and enact the skills and knowledge they have learned.

As a lead project fellow over the 4 years, I worked closely with the research team, facilitating and conducting interviews, training interview teams, and conducting analyses. The analysis of the interviews was a multi-step process that began in the field within the two to three person interview teams and amongst the broader data collection team. Analysis continued once field-work was complete through coding with NVivo software to identify themes. Although our understanding of youth's lives may have been constrained because the interviews were conducted on an annual basis and thus what youth related to the researchers reflected their reality at a specific point in time each year, a number of factors in the research design helped to mitigate this. As a longitudinal study we had an opportunity to further explore themes that emerged in the first years of the study through follow-up interviews that were designed to further probe salient themes, seek clarification of unclear or surprising findings and follow changes in youths' lives from one year to the next. In addition, the diverse research team, which included Kenyan researchers and United States university researchers who were from the region or had extensive experience in the region, allowed us to contextualize youth responses.

I came to the study with 15 years of prior experience in East and West Africa and as such was able to contextualize those stories within a Kenya and Nairobi specific context. Furthermore, my ability to speak and understand Swahili not only provided a space whereby youth felt comfortable using language fluidly, it also was a mechanism through which to understand the nuances with which the youth spoke and that sometimes could be lost in the translation process. As a researcher with the project during the 4 years of the study, I became intimately familiar with the stories youth shared of the changes that were taking place in their lives and livelihoods. I began to explore how empowerment and subsequently agency were being demonstrated in youth's lives. Drawing on empowerment frameworks and concepts of agency developed by Kabeer (1999), and Murphy-Graham (2012), I reanalyzed interview data from 2012–2014 to identify ways in which the process of empowerment was evident in youth's lives. Using that analysis, I incorporated a set of questions into the fourth year of interviews to illicit a discussion of youth's conceptualizations of empowerment and

whether or not they saw this evident in their own lives. I then analyzed the ways in which youth conceptualized empowerment, together with their life experiences over 4 years, to examine how youth enact empowerment and agency in their own lives.

## **Developing Youth Agency Through *Njia***

Upon completion of the 4-month *Njia* program, almost all interviewed youth sought stable employment in the fields they studied or in a related field. For many youth, employment was a means to achieve a variety of goals, including supporting their families by providing school fees for siblings or buying basic needs, saving money to return to school or saving enough capital to pursue entrepreneurial opportunities. The majority of youth engaged in multiple earning and learning activities at any given time and most, though not all, saw shifts within their earning mechanisms from year to year. The trajectories that youth lives took in the 4 years after their participation in the *Njia* program demonstrated multiple ways in which youth experienced the process of empowerment and acted in agentic ways. More than being empowered by their employment, the stories of these youth over 4 years shows how they developed self-awareness and confidence, among other skills, and put these skills into action. It is through this process in which the youth became agentic by navigating livelihood opportunities, developing new goals and aspirations, and making life decision. In addition, their stories showed ways in which those trajectories were impacted by social and economic conditions that influenced their agency, at times constraining it.

### ***Personal Development and Critical Skills and Knowledge***

Over the 4-year period of the study, youth identified a number of ways in which they felt that participation in the *Njia* program had impacted their personal development and their acquisition of skills and knowledge. Youth frequently demonstrated a better understanding of themselves and those around them, increased self-confidence and self-awareness, improved communication abilities and an ability to relate with a wide range of people, all of which are identified by Murphy-Graham as aspects of recognition. These skills are frequently inter-related, as self-confidence leads to a greater willingness and ability to talk to people or openness to taking on other people's perspectives. Nathan<sup>4</sup> discussed these changes a year after completing the program:

Something that has changed a lot – I'm able to interact with people in a good way. In a makeable way. I'm able to solve issues in a way that I can say is good. I don't find myself getting angry at people. I know how to express myself. When I go for a job interview, I will

---

<sup>4</sup>Pseudonyms are used throughout this text for all study participants in order to protect anonymity. The year of the interview is included next to the quotes from participant interviews to provide insight into changes in participants' perspectives over the course of the four year study.



be able to express what I feel and what I have ... So I would say that my personal skills have improved big time. (Nathan, personal communication, 2013)

In addition to demonstrating new ways to interact with people, Nathan also highlighted that one year after participation in the program he was able to recognize his emotions, engage in conflict resolution and put his newfound skills in relating to people into action in the workplace and in his community. He did not view these situations as unduly difficult or traumatic, rather his ability to navigate encounters in the workplace and with people in his community demonstrated his ability to be agentic in everyday activities.

In the first year following their participation in the program, youth emphasized the ways they had experienced and used increased self-confidence and improved communication skills. Over time, as youth became more engaged in their communities and in employment or self-employment, their perspectives on how these skills impacted them shifted. In the third year of interviews, youth continued to highlight their ability to communicate and have self-confidence, but they also indicated that as their self-knowledge increased, their mindset had changed and they had increased motivation in their lives. Describing how he viewed himself, Thomas said that increased self-confidence and self-awareness contributed to increased motivation in his life. He explained that “[increased skills and self-confidence] gave me that desire to grow. I always say that. It gave me the inner passion and the self-drive to keep on moving.” After describing a classroom interaction where Thomas felt motivated, he further explained, “From there, [that situation] I said let me believe in myself. I always believe in myself. From [that point] I have never looked back. I have to keep moving” (Thomas, personal communication, 2014). While Thomas referred to this changed perspective as an inner passion and self-drive, other youth described this change as a new hope for their future or an opening of their minds.

Youth also demonstrated and valued increases in vocational skills, work readiness skills and improved financial literacy, all of which can be categorized as capacity development in Murphy-Graham’s (2012) dimensions of empowerment. Whether the vocational skills were the basic knowledge of how to wire a house, use an industrial sewing machine or how to fix a car, obtaining this knowledge also served to boost youth’s confidence as they completed the *Njia* program, in part because of the potential they saw in using these work readiness skills and knowledge in their employment. Andrew studied electrical wiring at *Njia* and his confidence in the second year of interviews remained strong. He indicated that having new skills improved his chances at securing employment:

For now what I can say is *Njia YEP* has opened my hopes. Like for me I did electricals and electronics, and before [participation in the program], in terms of fighting for a job, I could not go and find any job. I did not have any skills. But for now, I have the skills in electrical and electronics. I am able to do that. (Andrew, personal communication, 2012)

In year four Andrew was still gainfully employed by a contractor to do electrical wiring and frequently traveled to different parts of Kenya for contract jobs.

Even when technical skills did not lead directly to employment in the specific vocational field, youth often expressed pride in having knowledge that could be used in different ways. James shared how learning automotive skills served as a

mechanism for contributing to his family despite the fact that soon after the first year he left the automotive field to first set-up a food stall in a local market and later go to work at a supermarket. He said:

I got skills in automotive engineering. Those skills have helped me a lot. If the car breaks down, some parts I can fix instead of calling a mechanic. Then at least I am able to do services with the vehicles – minor services. (James, personal communication, 2013)

When asked if he charged a fee for working on vehicles, he replied, “When I am called by someone I charge you. But when I am travelling with my uncle, because he has his own car, if there is a problem with the car I can just fix it.” For James, the skills were useful for making small amounts of money on the side, but were more useful as a service that could be given to family members.

While the specific vocational skills that youth learned appeared to be less impactful over time, youth credited these skills with setting them on their current path and contributing to their initial employment experiences. Nathan, whose perspectives on confidence were shared above, described how learning electrical skills was a catalyst for the three jobs he held in 2014 that were not directly related to his vocational field. He explained it in this way:

I became a real estate manager with the training I received at *Njia*. I was able to study electricals. I was so good at it, the boss [of the NGO he now works at and who owns multiple properties] needed someone he could trust and I was that person. We had interacted before. He had seen me and had called me for quite sometime to look at his electricity. One day he called me and told me, ‘I need someone to work on my estate. I don’t think you would be a bad idea’ ... If it wasn’t for the electrical part that I did, I’m pretty sure that I wouldn’t have gotten where I am today. I would not be able to repair electronics and electrical anywhere. Therefore I wouldn’t have met [my boss]. I met him through knowing to repair electricity, then that means that repairing electricity has made me a better person in this life. (Nathan, personal communication, 2014)

Whether or not youth were employed in the field in which they received training, youth perceived these tangible skills and knowledge as providing them with opportunities and increasing their self-confidence.

### ***Putting Skills and Knowledge into Action***

Youth demonstrated agency through using these tangible skills and knowledge as well as personal development as they actively navigated new opportunities, expanded their aspirations and made decisions that affected their livelihoods and personal trajectories. As youth completed the program they entered into vocational settings that were unfamiliar and into situations that were uncertain. Youth put into practice their reported increased self-confidence, newly acquired ability to relate to people along with new technical skills to navigate these difficult situations. One young man talked about his ability to handle difficult customers without feeling belittled during the conversation. Another youth, Abigail, used those skills to negotiate a difficult situation with her boss:

I've gained confidence. I've gained confidence. And then when I saw that money was not enough, I approached my boss, I told her this and this – this money is not enough, I'll appreciate if you could add me some (i.e. give me a raise) ... because she saw my work was good so she just [increased my pay]. (Abigail, personal communication, 2014)

In this situation, Abigail used the financial literacy skills she gained through the program to plan a budget and see how much money she would need to make, not only for her current needs but also what would be needed to reach her future goals. Having identified these goals, she used her increased self-confidence and ability to communicate with her boss to seek out a raise. Her efforts were rewarded and she was given a raise and later received a promotion.

Not all youth were able to work directly with their managers or bosses to effect change within their work environment. Youth, particularly females, who had gone through vocational training in hospitality frequently noted that there were many challenges that they faced in the hospitality industry (Nikoi, Krause, Gebru, & Eschenbacher, 2013). These ranged from feeling unsafe in work settings, facing discrimination and sexual harassment, and working late into the night which made their commutes back home unsafe. Some youth found ways to navigate the challenges within the workplace by discussing problems with their supervisors, like Lucy who has worked at the same hotel for four years in different capacities:

Sometimes people want a room, others just want to have a relationship and if I refuse they tell the manager some lies and *I have had to learn how to defend myself*<sup>5</sup> because at the office the motto is customers are always right, so it becomes hard. (Lucy, personal communication, 2015)

Lucy's ability to stand up to difficult customers and communicate with her supervisors is in contrast to the how she describes herself prior to the program. In 2012, she indicated that before gaining communication skills and self-confidence she "was *so* shy actually. I could not speak." Furthermore, the ability to confidently relate with her supervisors has meant that rather than having accusations from customers hinder her employment options, she has been able to defend herself and, over the four years, move into more desirable employment types within the company (i.e., from room attendant, to front desk receptionist).

Navigating employment conditions or changing the types of employment was not only observed with youth who worked in the hospitality industry. Youth in other sectors also found it necessary to make changes to their employment situations, often because the working schedules, the sense of job security or working conditions made it difficult for them to make progress toward other goals. Since many youth saw their current employment not as an end goal but rather a means to an end, they often sought new employment opportunities that would give them more flexibility. For instance, a young man who worked in a security firm requested the night shift so that he would be able to go to school during the day. Other youth requested that their employers give them consistent day hours so that they could enroll in night courses. While not everyone was successful in getting supervisors to agree to these

---

<sup>5</sup>Emphasis added by author.

changes, those who were unable to change their schedules were looking for other job opportunities that would be more flexible or they had established a savings plan in the hopes that they would be able to quit their jobs in the future to pursue their education.

Leaving employment was not always a youth's choice but also came about because of changes in management, the closing down of companies or because certain employers preferred to hire people on a short-term basis to avoid paying higher wages. Edward had lost a job due to a personal illness and found that once he was well his employer was not willing to take him back. Although able to find other employment in the hospitality industry he decided that until he found a stable, well-paying job he would only look for casual<sup>6</sup> employment opportunities:

For now I am doing casuals. Permanent jobs, they did not pay good money which can cater you for other things like [transportation] fares and rent. Casual jobs give you a chance to go forward and apply for other jobs, even as you are already employed. If you are employed [in contract or permanent positions] in which they pay you low money, you will not have a chance to apply to another job that is good. That is why I do casuals for the time being and I will get a better [job] as time goes on. (Edward, personal communication, 2014)

Like many youth, Edward found himself in an undesirable situation due to unforeseen circumstances. However, he credits the recognition skills, including self-knowledge and an ability to think about and plan for his future, for his ability to navigate the situation in a way that would satisfy his immediate needs, benefit his long-term goals and assist his family (by paying his brother's school fees). Although offered more secure but low-paying employment, he felt that those positions limited his ability to pursue better work placements or the opportunity to further his education.

In the process of pursuing their goals, youth enacted their financial literacy and planning skills by developing business plans, identifying potential education centers to attend, ascertaining how much money they would need to save to take the next step and engaging in multiple ways of saving and planning to get there. In order to pursue business ideas or continue their education, youth were aware that their first step needed to be accruing capital or identifying funds for school fees. In the same way that youth navigated their employment and self-employment opportunities, youth navigated the financial systems to find the best fit for their needs. The decision to save was not made without sacrifice by youth. Despite the fact that by the fourth year of the study many youth were in positions where they could meet their needs and assist family members, saving for yet unknown future needs was not always an easy decision to make, as demonstrated by Dorothy:

First, I'm saving for my school. Because I want to do my degree. And in case anything happens, I just want to have something that will be able to help me ... When I decide to save I must deny myself some things. I have to sacrifice so that I save because if I decide I have to use all my money, I won't be able to save. (Dorothy, personal communication, 2014)

---

<sup>6</sup>Casual employment are work opportunities that are not stable or guaranteed. Casual employment takes several forms, including waiting outside of companies or factories each morning as workers for the day are selected.

Identifying her goals, planning for her future and taking the necessary steps and decisions to achieve those goals highlights one way in which Dorothy agentically advanced her personal aspirations. However, youths' actions to pursue their desired livelihoods were not solely based on their own desires and goals, but by the needs of those around them as well.

### *Agency as Socially Enacted*

The needs of family and community also impacted the decisions youth made as they sought to achieve their goals and they received either financial or emotional support from them. For example, as the youth's opportunities and financial well-being increased they were expected to contribute to their families as well. At times this meant that youth had to delay their own goals in order to meet others' needs. David described the way his family impacted his decision-making in this way:

I was planning to go back to school to continue with my diploma, but I didn't have that chance to save due to unavoidable circumstances. I was not able to raise that amount. But this year I am planning to go back to school ... [Last year] instead of saving I used that money to pay for my brother's fees because he is in Form 4 right now. At that time the principal needed the whole amount for the school fees, so I chipped in the amount I had already saved. I paid for his school fees. That way, I was unable to go and enroll. (David, personal communication, 2014)

While family obligations may appear as a constraint to youths' abilities to achieve their livelihood goals, youth were aware that their willingness to step in and assist in family matters shaped their role within the community and in the family. Financial contributions for family well-being were an avenue to engage with the community in new ways, as youth were more likely to be invited into community discussions or family-decision making or serve as role models to other youth. This change in stature and in the ways in which they were perceived within their family or community provided youth with a sense of pride.

The youth supported their families and communities not only through their financial contributions, but also by sharing their knowledge and ways of knowing that they learned in the program. Their changing status within the community as someone who had accomplished their goals afforded them with an opportunity to encourage others to think similarly about the future by setting long-term goals and making plans for achieving those goals. Edward, the youth who decided to work in casual employment rather than in long-term jobs that did not pay well, described how the changes he experienced in his life and the agentic actions he took affected his friends. He explained:

[My friends] do look at me as I was and they look at me as I am now, and they see change. They have a hope of asking 'How? What do you do?' I give them stories about *Njia* and I show them some things. I have realized that as we talk, as we share, as we do our music, they are really changing. Some used to drink, some used to just be there with nothing – but they have a knowledge on how to look for their survival so that they can be better people in the future. (Edward, personal communication, 2014)

Edward's accomplishments, which he has attributed to a new self-confidence, a renewed way of thinking about his future and the ability to use the technical work-related skills he had received, were evident to other youth around him and afforded him the opportunity to share these skills and new ways of thinking on to others. His ability to act toward his goals also influenced how he engaged with his family and friends to affect their ways of thinking.

## Discussion

The urban Kenyan youth in this study demonstrated everyday agency as they set goals and took the necessary steps to achieve them. They also demonstrated that their ability to agentially engage in achieving their livelihood and personal goals were facilitated by both personal development, identified by Murphy-Graham (2012) as recognition, and technical and financial skills and knowledge, which is similar to her conceptualization of capacity development. Youth's ability to apply skills and knowledge to new and ever-changing settings spoke to both their willingness and ability to adapt their goals as needed as well as to some of the challenges youth faced in their lives. Goal-setting and decision-making highlighted how youth used individual agency to navigate their own lives. In putting skills and knowledge into practice to further their economic opportunities and pursue their chosen livelihoods, youth demonstrated the importance of individual agency in changing their life situation. In essence these new skills and knowledge were a platform from which to imagine and actively pursue new possibilities.

Despite their ability to use their personal development, skills and knowledge as they navigated their livelihood opportunities, youth faced difficulties that influenced their opportunities, decisions and the goals they set for themselves. The economic sector where youth worked and engaged in earnings opportunities was competitive and while some youth were able to put their recognition skills into practice and negotiated for raises or more suitable work hours, many other youths were still searching for positions that would give them more opportunities. Other youth attempted to overcome these challenges by starting their own small businesses, which was often constraining as youth rarely had access to the capital needed to start a business or to sustain it in difficult business environments. These constraints presented obstacles that frequently shaped the decisions youth made and the trajectories—both economic and social—that their lives took. Youth who had difficulty overcoming constraints in the workplace often expressed frustration and less confidence in their ability to change their immediate situations. On the other hand, youth who had successfully navigated difficult situations felt that the ability to enact skills and knowledge in turn increased the confidence they had in themselves and their capacity to impact their current situations.

Moreover, youth agency was socially embedded and was demonstrated through the everyday changes in their families and communities. Similar to Joseph's (2012) study, family support systems greatly impacted the decisions youth in this study

made and the ways in which they enacted new skills and knowledge. While youth may not have enacted large-scale social change, they consciously applied their skills and knowledge in ways that impacted their larger family structures and, at times, the communities where they lived. For example, they were able to help siblings continue schooling or they encouraged other youth to change their goals or approach to life. While social factors at times impacted youths' ability to pursue personal goals, I would argue that their actions are part of the social fabric where youth lived. While the need to pay for a sibling's school fees may have meant that a youth had to delay opening their own business, their family was the same social fabric that supported youth when they participated in the *Njia* program and they needed transportation money each day, or from whom they received the necessary encouragement to go ahead and try a small-business venture. Youths' livelihood decisions were not made independently and these factors, while perhaps unusual or unexpected outside of this context, were part of the "normal lens" through which youth viewed their lives.

Payne's (2012) concept of everyday agency was evident in these youths' actions. Youth did not discuss their decision-making process or livelihoods within a context of extraordinary situations, or as steps that would promote extraordinary results. Instead they saw their everyday needs and relationships and pursued ways to improve their immediate and long-term situations. In addition to their own situation, they desired to help those with whom they had the most contact—their families, peers, and local community—to effect change in their daily lives.

## Conclusion

This chapter examined the role non-formal, vocational training can play among urban Kenyan youth in fostering agency. For economically marginalized youth, skills and knowledge that provided entrée to employment or entrepreneurship opportunities were important elements that enabled youth to agentially engage in livelihood opportunities and pursue both personal and socially informed goals. However, this chapter also demonstrates that beyond gaining technical skills associated with vocational training and putting them into practice, youth agency hinged on an increase in personal development skills as well. Like Murphy-Graham's (2012) description of recognition and capacity development, the combination of new ways of thinking, technical skill development and self-knowledge were important elements in youth agency. Furthermore, youth agency was constructed within a social setting that both supported youth and placed expectations on them, influencing their decisions and livelihood trajectories. Although youth used their personal development and technical skills to advance their personal goals, they did so in a social setting in which they also accounted for the needs of those closest to them. Additionally, youth did not envision the decisions they made, or the actions they took, as countering or contributing to discourses of youth writ large as either trouble-makers or as the hope for the future. Rather their agentic actions were understood as logical next steps to achieving their goals and meeting the needs of those around them.

The integration of Murphy-Graham's (2012) framework for empowerment and agency with socially embedded, everyday agency provides a refined avenue through which to understand youth agency and the role of education in fostering agency amongst urban youth. This study has implications for development organizations and policy makers as they strive to address high youth un- and under-employment rates through vocational skills training or by providing employment and entrepreneurial opportunities to youth. The study demonstrates that the value of technical and vocational skills is enhanced when youth also develop a greater self-awareness and confidence in their ability to effect change in their lives. In addition, the value that youth place on increased skills and knowledge is only in part related to their desire to achieve personal livelihood goals. This type of educational programming is most compelling for the opportunity it affords to engage with youth as they navigate opportunities and reposition themselves as agents of change in their larger family settings, communities where they live and in their own lives.

## References

- Abbink, J., & van Kessel, I. (Eds.). (2005). *Vanguard or vandals: Youth, politics and conflict in Africa*. Leiden, The Netherlands: Koninklijke Brill NV.
- Allison, C., Krause, B., Jaafar, A., Liuzzi, A., DeJaeghere, J., & Chapman, D. (2014). Youth prospects in East Africa: Current evidence and knowledge gaps in youth employment and livelihood programming. Unpublished manuscript. Minneapolis, MN: University of Minnesota.
- Bajaj, M. (2011). *Schooling for social change: The rise and impact of human rights education*. New York, NY: Continuum International Publishing Group.
- Betcherman, G., Godfrey, M., Puerto, S., Rother, F., & Stavreska, A. (2007). A review of interventions to support young workers: Findings of the youth employment inventory. *Social Protection Discussion Paper No. 0715*. World Bank. Retrieved December 24, 2015, from [http://siteresources.worldbank.org/SPLP/Resources/461653-1253133947335/6440424-1271427186123/6976445-1271432453795/YEI\\_2007\\_full\\_report.pdf](http://siteresources.worldbank.org/SPLP/Resources/461653-1253133947335/6440424-1271427186123/6976445-1271432453795/YEI_2007_full_report.pdf).
- Chismaya, G., DeJaeghere, J., Kendall, N., & Khan, M. (2012). Gender and 'Education for All': Progress and problems in achieving gender equity. *International Journal of Educational Development*, 32(6), 743–755.
- DeJaeghere, J., McCleary, K., & Josić, J. (2016). Conceptualizing youth agency. In J. DeJaeghere, J. Josić, & K. McCleary (Eds.), *Education and youth agency: Qualitative case studies in global context*. Cham, Switzerland: Springer.
- Government of Kenya. (2010). *The constitution of Kenya*. Nairobi, Kenya: Government of Kenya. Retrieved December 17, 2014, from <https://www.kenyaembassy.com/pdfs/The%20Constitution%20of%20Kenya.pdf>.
- Honwana, A., & De Boeck, F. (Eds.). (2005). *Makers & breakers: Children and youth in postcolonial Africa*. Trenton, NJ: Africa World Press, Inc.
- Joseph, M. C. (2012). Social agency of low-income 'young' women in Gaborone City, Botswana. *Studies of Changing Societies: Youth Under Global Perspective*, 1(5), 37–62.
- Kabeer, N. (1999). Resources, agency, achievements: Reflections on the measurement of women's empowerment. *Development and Change*, 30(3), 435–464.
- King, K. (2007). Balancing basic and post-basic education in Kenya: National vs. international policy agendas. *International Journal of Educational Development*, 27(4), 358–370.
- King, K., & McGrath, S. (2012). Education and development in Africa: Lessons of the past 50 years for beyond 2015. In *Conference Proceedings: CAS @50*, 6–8 June 2012. Edinburgh, UK (Unpublished). Retrieved April 2, 2013, from <http://eprints.nottingham.ac.uk/1640/>.



- McGrath, S. (2012). Vocational education and training for development: A policy in need of a theory? *International Journal of Educational Development*, 32(5), 623–631.
- Ministry of Education. (2011). *Free day secondary education Programme*. Nairobi, Kenya. Retrieved November 1, 2012, from <http://www.education.go.ke/Documents.aspx?docID=2019>.
- Ministry of Education. (2012). Education statistics: Facts and figures [data file]. Retrieved April 5, 2012, from <http://www.education.go.ke/Documents.aspx?department=52&id=868>.
- Murphy-Graham, E. (2012). *Opening minds, improving lives: Education and women's empowerment in Honduras*. Nashville, TN: Vanderbilt University Press.
- Nikoi, A., Krause, B., Gebru, E., & Eschenbacher, H., with Chapman, D., DeJaeghere, J., & Pellowski-Wiger, N. (2013). *The MasterCard Foundation learn, earn, and save initiative: Synthesis report for Njia Youth Empowerment Program*. Minneapolis, MN: University of Minnesota, Department of Organizational Leadership, Policy, and Development.
- Njonjo, K. S. (2010). *Youth fact book: Infinite possibility or definite disaster?* Nairobi, Kenya: Institute of Economic Affairs.
- Ohba, A. (2011). The abolition of secondary school fees in Kenya: Responses by the poor. *International Journal of Educational Development*, 31(4), 402–408.
- Oyaro, K. (2008, March 26). Kenya: Free secondary schooling policy faces testing times. *Inter Press Service News Agency*.
- Ozier, O. (2011). The impact of secondary schooling in Kenya: A regression discontinuity analysis. Unpublished manuscript. University of California at Berkeley.
- Payne, R. (2012). 'Extraordinary survivors' or 'ordinary lives'? Embracing 'everyday agency' in social interventions with child-headed households in Zambia. *Children's Geographies*, 10(4), 399–411.
- Sommers, M. (2007). Creating programs for Africa's urban youth: The challenge of marginalization. *Journal of International Cooperation in Education*, 10(1), 19–31.
- Stromquist, N. (2015). Women's empowerment and education: Linking knowledge to transformative action. *European Journal of Education*, 50(3), 307–324.
- Tembon, M., & Fort, L. (Eds.). (2008). *Girls' education in the 21st century: Gender equality, empowerment and economic growth*. Washington, DC: World Bank.
- United Nations Development Programme. (2013). Kenya's youth employment challenge. Discussion paper. New York, NY: UNDP.
- Warner, A., Malhotra, A., & McGonagle, A. (2012). *Girls' education, empowerment and transitions to adulthood: The case for a shared agenda*. Report for International Center for Research on Women (ICRW). Retrieved December 1, 2015, from <http://www.icrw.org/publications/girls-education-empowerment-and-transitions-adulthood>.