





# Higher education, job or entrepreneurship? Rural high school learners' perceptions of post-matric options in Mpumalanga, South Africa



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**Background:** Making post-matric and career decisions is a significant challenge for rural high school learners in South Africa, where access to career assessments, information and professional guidance is limited. While urban schools increasingly benefit from career services, rural learners face persistent structural and informational barriers that negatively impact their career decision-making.

**Objectives:** This study explores how Grade 12 learners at a rural high school in Mpumalanga, South Africa, perceive and navigate their post-matric career decisions. It focuses on the factors influencing their choices in a context marked by socio-economic constraints.

**Methods:** A qualitative research design was used, drawing on focus group discussions and reflexive essays from 17 Grade 12 learners. Thematic content analysis and ATLAS.ti were used to analyse and present findings.

**Results:** Most learners aspire to higher education as a pathway to social mobility, but face financial barriers and limited university access. Some seek immediate employment to support their families or save for further study, while others consider entrepreneurship because of high youth unemployment. While career guidance is important, many rural schools lack trained professionals and sufficient resources. Learners rely on peers, family and informal school initiatives for advice.

**Conclusion:** Structural inequalities significantly shape learners' post-matric choices and limit their access to informed career pathways, reinforcing cycles of disadvantage.

**Contribution:** This study contributes to understanding rural youth career decision-making in South Africa and calls for enhanced career counselling, increased financial aid and support for vocational and alternative pathways.

**Keywords:** high school learners; post-matric options; higher education; employment; entrepreneurship; career guidance.

## Introduction

The transition from high school to adulthood is a critical phase that shapes young people's career trajectories and life opportunities. For Grade 12 learners in South Africa, this transition is influenced by an interplay of structural and personal factors, including socio-economic conditions, family background, financial constraints and access to career guidance (Maila & Ross, 2018; Maree, 2012; Muyambi & Ahiaku, 2025). This stage becomes consequential especially for learners in rural contexts, where options are often limited, and decisions are made within constrained environments (Dipitso, 2021). Rural high school learners in South Africa face structural challenges rooted in apartheid legacies, including geographic isolation, unequal access to quality education and inadequate career guidance services (Abrahams et al., 2015; Miles, 2015; Muyambi & Ahiaku, 2025). While urban schools benefit from career services and support, rural learners often lack access to these resources, leaving them uncertain about their post-school options (Abrahams et al., 2015; Miles, 2015). Learners in rural areas often rely on family, peers or life orientation teachers for advice (Ngobese et al., 2020; Miles & Naidoo, 2016). At the same time, rising tuition costs, limited admission to institutions of higher education and high youth unemployment, estimated at 59.6% among individuals aged 15–24, constrain their decision-making and life chances (Regenesys Business School, 2018; Serfontein & Smit, 2024; Statistics South Africa, 2024).

Although many high school learners aspire to pursue higher education as a pathway to social mobility (Dipitso, 2021), they are compelled to consider alternative routes, such as entering the labour market or exploring entrepreneurship (Francis & Webster, 2019; Nkosi, 2021; Statistics South Africa, 2024). Some seek employment to support their families and save for future study (Ntshiza, 2018), while others view entrepreneurship as a response to persistent youth unemployment and exclusion from formal job opportunities (Mondli et al., 2022; Musariwa & Tinonetsana, 2023). Despite a growing body of literature on post-school transitions and youth employment, there is a significant gap in understanding how learners in rural provinces such as Mpumalanga perceive and rationalise their post-matric options. This study, therefore, explores how Grade 12 learners at a rural high school in Mpumalanga perceive their post-matric career decisions. It focuses on the factors influencing their choices in a context characterised by socio-economic constraints, academic challenges and varying levels of school-based support. By examining the structural and personal factors influencing these choices, this research aims to highlight the critical need for enhanced career counselling, improved financial support mechanisms and the promotion of alternative pathways, such as vocational education and entrepreneurship training, especially in rural areas.

## Literature review

The transition from high school to adulthood presents significant challenges for South African learners, particularly in navigating post-matric options, such as higher education, employment or entrepreneurship. These decisions are often shaped by an interplay of socio-economic conditions, structural inequalities, family dynamics and the availability of career guidance (Muyambi & Ahiaku, 2025). While national policy initiatives have sought to improve access to education and employment opportunities, disparities remain, particularly for rural and underprivileged learners, who face multiple and intersecting barriers (Mlambo & Mpanza, 2024).

Higher education remains an aspiration for many South African high school learners, as it is seen as a pathway to improved career prospects and upward social mobility (Dipitso, 2021). However, access to higher education is hindered by limited university spaces, financial constraints and academic preparedness. For instance, while 47.8% of matriculants achieve bachelor's passes, qualifying them for university admission, there are only 202000 university spaces available for over 333700 eligible applicants (Fisher, 2025). This problem is more severe for rural learners who also contend with relocation costs and limited access to support networks (Van Niekerk et al., 2024). Although the National Student Financial Aid Scheme (NSFAS) aims to address financial barriers, it remains overburdened and often inaccessible to all who qualify for assistance (Mlambo & Mpanza, 2024).

Learners from under-resourced schools often struggle with key subjects, such as STEM (Science, Technology, Engineering and Mathematics), which are crucial for accessing competitive university programmes and careers

(Albien & Naidoo, 2018; Reynolds & Moyo, 2024). These challenges in academic performance not only limit higher education options but also shape learners' post-matric aspirations. In response to these constraints, learners increasingly consider employment or entrepreneurship as practical alternatives. While some view employment as a short-term strategy to finance further studies or gain work experience (Ntshiza, 2018), others see entrepreneurship as a long-term solution to economic hardship and job scarcity (Musariwa & Tinonetsana, 2023). Yet, people face difficulties accessing startup capital, markets and relevant training (Mondli et al., 2022).

Entrepreneurship has emerged as a viable, though challenging, post-matric option for many learners, particularly in response to rising youth unemployment (Musariwa & Tinonetsana, 2023). For learners unable to access higher education or formal jobs, self-employment is often seen as a practical strategy for financial independence. However, barriers such as lack of startup capital, market access and entrepreneurial training persist, especially in rural and under-resourced communities (Mondli et al., 2022; Van Niekerk et al., 2024). Although government and non-governmental organisation (NGO) initiatives offer entrepreneurship programmes, these are often concentrated in urban areas and not easily accessible to rural learners. Positively, some institutions have begun promoting entrepreneurship through school-based outreach, digital platforms and university-linked incubators (Reynolds & Moyo, 2024). Expanding these initiatives to rural areas could diversify learners' post-matric options and offer sustainable pathways outside formal employment (Fisher, 2025).

Career guidance is critical in shaping learners' post-matric decisions, yet it remains unevenly distributed across South African schools. Many rural schools lack qualified career counsellors and resources, limiting learners' ability to make informed decisions (Abrahams et al., 2015; Maree, 2012). Without structured support, learners often rely on peers, parents or teachers who have limited training, contributing to uninformed subject choices that later restrict career paths (Department of Education, 2025). Research also shows that effective guidance can align learners' skills, interests and aspirations with realistic post-school options (Hirschi, 2019). Several innovative interventions have been introduced to fill this gap. Mentorship programmes pairing high school learners with university students have shown promise in demystifying career pathways, admissions and funding (Brodowicz, 2024). In addition, career days and digital platforms offer learners exposure to diverse professions and decision-making tools (Mseleku, 2022). However, these efforts remain unevenly implemented, especially in rural areas. Strengthening school-based guidance and ensuring equitable access to career information are essential to expanding learners' choices and long-term career satisfaction.

Family background and parental expectations also significantly influence learners' career choices. In South African households, particularly in lower-income communities, financial stability often dictates whether a

learner pursues further education or enters the job market immediately (Cipriano et al., 2017). Parents who lack higher education qualifications themselves may not always have the necessary information to guide their children effectively. Parental expectations can also create tension in career decision-making. Chen and Wang (2023) found that in cultures with strong family values, learners often feel pressured to pursue high-status careers such as medicine, law or engineering, even when their personal interests lie elsewhere. While parental support can be beneficial, rigid expectations can lead to dissatisfaction and disengagement in one's career path (Savickas, 2019). Positive parental involvement, on the other hand, has been linked to increased career exploration and success. When parents actively engage in discussions about career options, provide financial and emotional support and encourage independent decision making, learners are more likely to pursue careers aligned with their interests and abilities (Chen et al., 2017).

The existing literature highlights that South African high school learners, particularly Grade 12 learners, face multiple challenges in navigating post-matric pathways. However, there is still limited qualitative research that explores how rural high school learners perceive and navigate their options within everyday constraints. In particular, little is known about how learners rationalise decisions such as postponing university, seeking jobs or pursuing entrepreneurship, especially in rural areas such as Mpumalanga. This study addresses this gap by foregrounding the perceptions of rural learners and examining how they exercise agency in shaping their futures within structural limitations.

## Theoretical framework

This study adopts the social learning theory of career choice, which argues that career decisions are shaped by four key factors, namely genetic endowment, environmental conditions, learning experiences and task approach skills (Krumboltz, 1996). The theoretical framework is well-suited to understanding how high school learners in rural South Africa navigate post-matric options, as it highlights that both structural and personal influences are involved in career decision-making. According to Krumboltz (1996), genetic endowment, which can be traits such as natural abilities, plays a role in shaping career choices. In the context of this study, some learners may be inclined toward specific career paths because of their inherent skills and interests, such as excelling in mathematics and pursuing engineering. However, while personal traits provide a foundation, they do not solely determine career trajectories.

Krumboltz (1996) further argues that environmental factors such as economic conditions, family expectations, access to education and career guidance, significantly shape learners' career aspirations. Social support networks – including family, teachers and mentors – also play a crucial role in shaping learners' choices (Dina & Putra, 2022; Kim et al., 2016). Krumboltz (1996) also posits that individuals' past learning experiences shape their career interests and future aspirations. In rural South Africa, limited exposure to diverse

career options often constrains learners' decision-making. Many learners base their choices on observed role models, such as teachers, community leaders or family members, who influence their understanding of available career paths. Task approach skills are another element shaping career choices. Krumboltz (1996) notes the importance of task approach skills such as problem-solving abilities, resilience, and self-confidence – in influencing career decision-making. For instance, learners who engage in structured career guidance activities such as workshops, mentorship programmes and skills training are better equipped to make informed decisions about their futures.

Krumboltz's Learning Theory is relevant for this study as it assists in understanding the impact of external influences such as economic barriers, social expectations and school resources on high school learners' careers or life decision making. Furthermore, the theory's focus on learning experiences suggests that improving career exposure and guidance in rural schools could significantly enhance high school learners' ability to make informed post-matric decisions.

## Research design and methods

This study employed a qualitative research design to explore the perceptions of Grade 12 learners in a rural South African high school regarding their post-matric options. According to Babbie (2021), qualitative research is well-suited for studies that seek to gain deeper insights into a phenomenon from participants' perspectives. The study aimed to gain in-depth insights into how learners navigate post-school decisions within a context of structural constraints such as poverty, limited opportunities and lack of guidance. This research design thus allowed researchers to better understand learners' views on post-matric pathways and the information they require to make informed decisions.

## Participants and sampling

This study emanates from the engaged scholarship project, Advocacy for Diversity, Inclusion and Well-being. The project is registered with the College of Human Sciences and, in collaboration with the Directorate for Counselling and Career Development (DCCD) at the University of South Africa (UNISA), hosted the Mandela Day Outreach in 2024 at a rural high school in Mpumalanga. The Mandela Day Outreach is an annual event hosted at this specific rural high school in Mpumalanga by engaged scholarship project members and DCCD professionals. Over the years, these entities have built a professional relationship with the high school. With the principal's permission, facilitators engaged directly with learners during the outreach event. The outreach aimed to provide high school learners with information and support regarding career choices and access to higher education institutions. As such, the study targeted Grade 12 learners, and a non-probability purposive sampling technique was used to select participants who were in their final year of schooling and actively engaged in post-matric planning. A total of 17 Grade 12 learners participated in the

study through engaging in focus group discussions with facilitators in a classroom. The learners were selected based on their willingness to participate and their relevance to the study's focus on post-matric decisions among matriculants.

## Data collection methods

For this study, data were collected during the 2024 Mandela Day Outreach event. During the event, facilitators – both members of the engaged scholarship project and those affiliated with the DCCD – conducted focused group discussions with Grade 12 learners. These discussions explored learners' perceptions of post-matric options, focusing on their career aspirations, reasons for their choices, the support they received in high school for career and life decisions and the additional support they needed for their post-matric plans. According to Krueger and Casey (2015), focus group discussions are a suitable qualitative research method for gathering in-depth insights on a specific topic from participants in a guided discussion. This method allowed researchers to engage directly with learners about their post-matric plans.

To supplement the focus group discussions, learners were asked to complete reflexive essays in which they responded to structured, open-ended questions aligned with the discussion themes. Reflexive essays provided an additional means for learners to express their perspectives. Bolton (2010) highlights that reflexive essay writing involves critical reflection on personal experiences, perspectives or learning processes. The combination of group dialogue and individual written reflections allowed for a richer and

triangulated dataset (Bolton, 2010; Krueger & Casey, 2015). All completed reflexive essays were scanned and uploaded to ATLAS.ti for analysis.

## Data analysis

Thematic content analysis was used to analyse the reflexive essays from high school learners about the topic under investigation. Thematic analysis is an interpretative method used for qualitative data analysis that helps to identify and analyse themes or patterns in a given dataset (Byrne, 2022). Braun and Clarke's (2006) suggested steps of thematic analysis were used to analyse data, which include familiarisation, coding and searching for themes and interpretation. Firstly, researchers familiarised themselves with the data by reading and uploading 17 completed reflexive essays into ATLAS.ti version 24. Secondly, codes were generated using ATLAS.ti version 24, whereby researchers critically read all the uploaded completed reflexive essays to identify similarities and differences in high school learners' responses to questions. During this process, researchers created 102 codes, which were then grouped into 16 code groups such as educational aspirations, employment prospects, academic challenges and support, entrepreneurship, etc (refer to Figure 1). The codes, including group codes, created using keywords from high school learners' responses, were used to search for themes and sub-themes aligned to the primary objective of this study. For instance, Theme 1 titled Educational Aspirations: Pursuing Higher Education and Desired Support was created from codes such as educational aspiration and academic support (see Figure 1). Thirdly, all the codes and code groups were

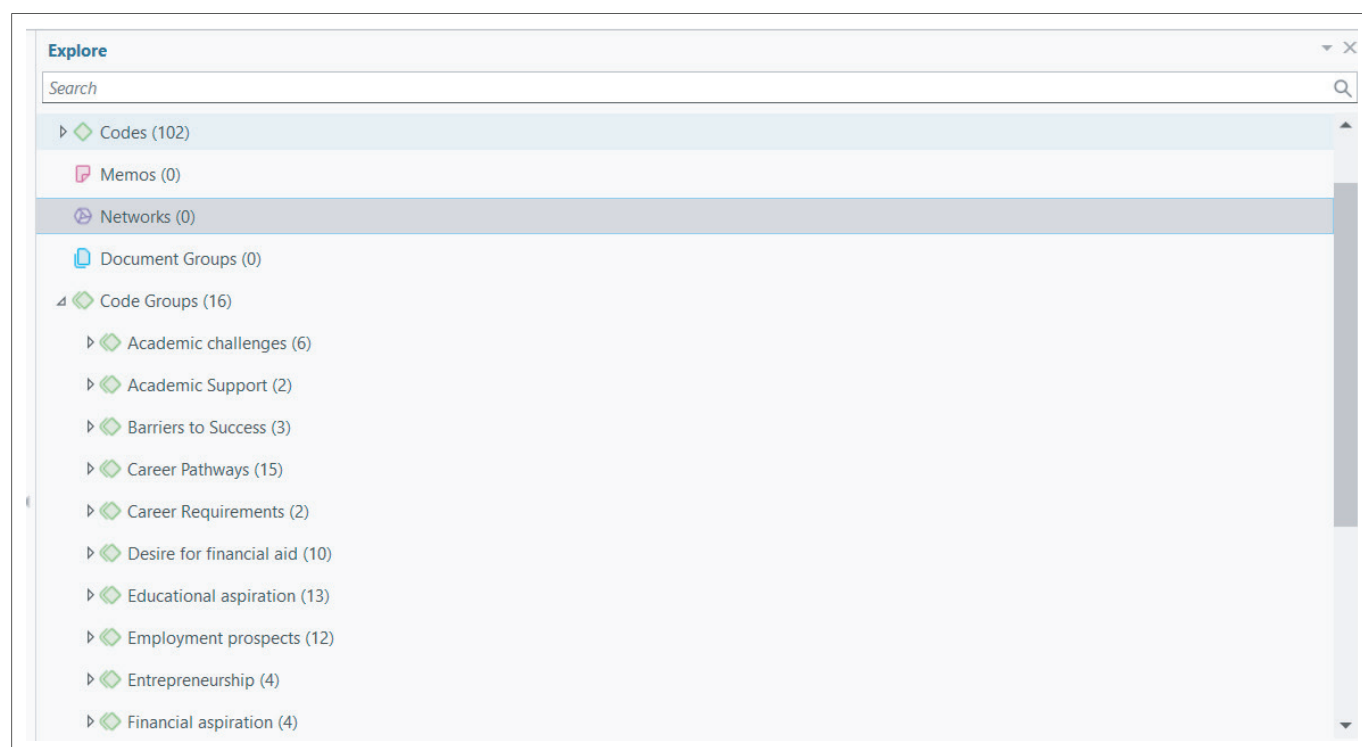


FIGURE 1: ATLAS.ti codes and group codes of high school learners' perceptions of post-matric options.

refined into themes and sub-themes, which guided interpretation and presentation of findings. These themes were also supported by the high school learners' quotes.

## Ethical considerations

To uphold ethical research standards, this study underwent an ethical clearance process and was approved by the University of South Africa College of Human Sciences Research Ethics Review Committee (No. 90002105\_CREC\_CHS\_2024) to ensure compliance with ethical guidelines. Given that most participants were under the age of 18, permission to conduct focus group discussions and for learners to complete reflexive essays was obtained from the school principal, who also informed the parents and guardians of learners about the Mandela Day Outreach event. High school learners were fully informed about the study's purpose and gave voluntary consent before the focus group discussions commenced in the classroom, and they gave consent to participate, as others who did not want to participate excused themselves from the classroom. They were assured of the confidentiality of their responses and their right to withdraw from the study at any stage without consequences. To further protect participants' identities, high school learners were not required to include personal information when completing the reflexive essays. Moreover, researchers used pseudonyms (e.g. 'Participant A') when using quotes from learners in the study.

## Findings: High school learners' perceptions of post-matric options

This section presents the key themes emerging from rural high school learners' reflections on their post-matric aspirations and perceived barriers. Drawing on focus group discussions and reflexive essays from 17 Grade 12 learners at a rural Mpumalanga high school, several overarching findings were derived. These findings are organised into four interrelated themes: (1) Educational Aspirations, (2) Employment, (3) Entrepreneurship and (4) School-Based Support and Challenges. The analysis reveals how rural high school learners navigate limited resources, financial pressure and inadequate guidance while imagining multiple future paths. These themes reflect both individual agency and structural constraints, providing an understanding of rural high school learners' career decision-making.

### Theme 1: Educational aspirations: Pursuing higher education and desired support

High school learners in this study expressed strong aspirations to pursue higher education, particularly by enrolling in universities or colleges. For many, obtaining a qualification was perceived as a key step towards securing employment opportunities, especially with the high unemployment rate. High school learners also associated higher education as the most viable pathway to achieving their career goals and financial independence. When high

school learners were asked about their plans after matric, most participants responded with clear intentions to further their studies:

'After completing matric, I am planning to go to higher learning institutions, so I can be able to get the job I want.' (Participant F)

'Going to higher learning institution because the job I want requires a qualification or degree.' (Participant E)

Participants E and F's responses, which are typical of many others in this study, reflect a broader pattern among high school learners who see the pursuit of higher education as an essential step in their career and employment trajectories. The strong emphasis on going to institutions of higher learning and acquiring formal qualifications suggests that high school learners are aware of the role that further education can play as a gateway to economic and life mobility, aligning with the broader societal narrative. It also indicates an awareness of the increasing credential requirements in various careers or professions and the labour market. Beyond career ambitions, high school learners' motivations to pursue higher education were also rooted in the intersection of personal and family circumstances. For instance, one participant reflected:

'I want to go to university to have a better life and motivate others about my life. I come from a poor family whereby my mom is working as a domestic worker and my sister did not reach matric level, so I want to change the situation at home.' (Participant A)

This response illustrates how higher education aspirations are linked to the desire to improve their lives and those of their families. For many high school learners, education is not only a means of individual empowerment but also a strategy to break cycles of poverty within their families. For instance, Participant A's response reflects how education is not only a pathway to individual success but also a means to uplift the family from economic hardship. The mention of the mother's employment as a domestic worker and the sister's limited educational attainment reinforces the idea that higher education is perceived as a critical tool for breaking intergenerational cycles of poverty. Similarly, other participants, like Participant G, in this study expressed a desire '*to have a better life*', suggesting a shared understanding that higher education can significantly improve one's socio-economic status. In this study, high school learners also reported their interest in various career choices and pathways, such as civil and mechanical engineering, accounting and law.

While many high school learners aspire to attend higher education institutions, their responses also highlighted the need for support in realising this goal. Many high school learners in this study emphasised the support they would need to realise their educational goals. Financial constraints are one of the pervasive challenges highlighted by high school learners as a concern, recognising that pursuing higher education requires financial support, particularly for tuition fees and study materials. When asked about the

needed support to achieve their educational aspirations of going to higher education institutions, many learners said:

'I will need some money for my books and school fees.' (Participant I)

'I need support when it comes to money because my mother is a single parent and working as a domestic worker.' (Participant A)

Participants I and A's responses reflect a broader issue affecting high school learners, particularly those from low-income backgrounds in rural areas. The financial burden of higher education often falls on families with limited economic means, making it difficult for high school learners to move into tertiary education. The concern expressed by Participant A further illustrates the intersection of socio-economic status and access to education, highlighting the particular vulnerability of learners from single-parent households or those dependent on low-wage labour. High school learners also noted that getting financial support from organisations such as the NSFAS would assist in the realisation of their educational and career aspirations.

The findings reveal high school learners' aspirations for higher education, viewing it as essential for employment and socio-economic mobility. Their goals are shaped not only by career ambitions but the desire to uplift their families from poverty. However, financial constraint was anticipated as a significant barrier, particularly for high school learners from low-income households. Therefore, there is a need to address such structural barriers to ensure equal access to higher education and opportunities. What distinguishes these rural learners from their urban counterparts is not only their shared aspiration for higher education, but their heightened vulnerability to localised constraints. Unlike learners in urban areas who may benefit from greater institutional proximity and greater access to online platforms, these learners often lack such infrastructure and relational capital. Their accounts reveal how geographic and economic marginalisation shape their ability to convert aspirations into realistic opportunities. Although high school learners reported educational aspirations of going to higher education institutions, others in this study showed interest in employment prospects.

## Theme 2: Employment as a stepping stone to education and career advancement

While many high school learners in this study aspire to pursue higher education, the structural barriers and constraints, such as limited access to tertiary institutions and financial challenges, lead some to consider alternative post-matric pathways. Other high school learners in this study considered pursuing the labour market in the form of seeking jobs as a viable alternative. Participants viewed entering the labour market immediately after matric as a necessary step to earn income that could later support their educational goals. When some high school learners were asked about their plans post-matric, they shared:

'I want to look for a job because I want to make money to go to institution of higher learning.' (Participant C)

This response highlights how economic realities shape rural high school learners' decisions, forcing them to balance their educational ambitions with immediate financial needs. For many, working after high school is not a rejection of further studying but a strategic attempt to accumulate the resources required to access higher education. Other high school learners in this study expressed aspirations to pursue higher education while seeking part-time employment to support themselves financially. They recognised the necessity of financial independence through earning an income to cover essential expenses such as tuition, transportation and daily living costs. As participants stated:

'I will also look for a job so that I can get paid while learning.' (Participant L)

'I am looking for a job so I can earn money for transport to travel to university.' (Participant R)

These reflections reveal how financial constraints do more than influencing access, as they shape the pathways high school learners take within and beyond education. The need for part-time employment highlights the precarious position many rural high school learners occupy, where academic progress is linked to the ability to earn an income. Meanwhile, some of the other participants in this study expressed aspirations to enter the labour market primarily to gain work experience. For instance, one participant emphasised the importance of gaining industry experience:

'Look for a job, so I can have experience within the working industry.' (Participant G)

It can be argued that high school learners, as part of the youth, are concerned about employability; hence, work experience is perceived as a crucial stepping stone for future career opportunities. The findings also suggest an awareness of the challenges young job seekers face, particularly in the labour markets where prior experience is often a prerequisite for securing stable employment.

## Theme 3: Entrepreneurship as an aspirational strategy for economic independence

In contrast to those seeking employment, other high school learners in this study expressed a desire to pursue entrepreneurship as a long-term and aspirational pathway. For these learners, starting a business is seen not only as a means of survival but also as a way to create value, address family needs and establish personal legacies. This sentiment was cited in one's response:

'To start a business because I want to create a legacy and solve my family's financial problems.' (Participant D)

This response illustrates how entrepreneurial ambition is rooted in both personal aspiration and structural necessity. For learners like Participant D, entrepreneurship provides an alternative to exclusion from formal employment and a path toward financial autonomy. It also reflects agency and future-oriented thinking despite limited access to capital or training. The desire to pursue entrepreneurship was linked to broader

concerns about high youth unemployment and a lack of formal job opportunities. For rural high school learners, entrepreneurship becomes a proactive strategy to generate income and avoid prolonged unemployment. For instance:

'I want to start my own business because jobs are hard to find these days.' (Participant B)

Many rural learners believe that entrepreneurship provides an alternative to exclusion from formal employment and a path toward financial autonomy. Their decisions reflect a response to local opportunity structures and a desire to take control of their futures in the absence of formal employment channels. The findings suggest that investing in and expanding entrepreneurship education and mentorship programmes could provide learners with viable alternatives to traditional employment pathways. Schools and communities are thus critical in equipping learners to navigate these pathways and to realise their career aspirations despite structural challenges. Although the decision regarding post-matric pathways lies with the learners, schools and communities have a crucial role in supporting learners in realising their dreams and aspirations.

#### **Theme 4: School support and challenges: Guidance and teachings**

This theme explores the role of schools in shaping high school learners' post-matric decisions, the forms of support learners receive and the challenges that may hinder their aspirations. Participants in this study recognised schools as influential spaces where career aspirations are nurtured, post-school opportunities are explored and learners are motivated to plan for the future. Many learners described supportive initiatives provided by their schools, particularly structured programmes aimed at helping them make informed post-matric decisions:

'They host career days for grade 11s and 12s every year and give us information about higher education.' (Participant O)

'They give us information and motivate us to take good decisions (for) after matric.' (Participant E)

Participants E and O's responses highlight the importance of school-based support and programmes, such as career days and guidance sessions, that expose high school learners to post-school opportunities. These activities were viewed as significant in motivating high school learners and providing them with accurate information regarding access to higher education and available support. The emphasis on making good decisions reflects the supportive and mentoring role that schools can also play in preparing learners for life after matric. Participants in this study highlighted that their school hosts career days, where Grade 11 and 12 learners are provided with information relating to access and support available for higher education and other opportunities.

Some high school learners expressed receiving similar support in pursuing alternative post-matric pathways, such as entrepreneurship and looking for employment. For instance, Participant N, who aspired to start a business, described the encouragement received from their school:

'They encourage me because they know that this thing will help me in the future.' (Participant N)

This demonstrates the recognition by some high schools that learners have diverse aspirations beyond university education. By supporting entrepreneurial ambitions, schools play a broader role in fostering economic self-sufficiency and career development. Such support also reflects a shift towards a more inclusive approach to post-school transitions, where multiple career trajectories are recognised and encouraged.

While high school learners were appreciative of the support they received in making post-matric decisions, they also face significant challenges that may influence their choices and career paths. A recurring concern among participants was their struggle with school subjects, such as English, Mathematics and Science. These subjects are often critical for accessing higher education and certain career opportunities, making confidence in academic ability a crucial factor in their decision-making processes. For instance, some learners expressed difficulties in achieving their desired academic performance:

'The challenge that I currently have is that I am not getting my desired marks or levels with English, as I always obtain a level 4.' (Participant C)

'I am experiencing challenges with mathematics and sciences subjects.' (Participant L)

These challenges suggest that while high school learners may aspire to further studies or specific career paths, their academic struggles could limit their options. The pressure to meet university entrance requirements or meet specific job criteria in the labour market may contribute to anxiety and uncertainty about the future. As such, it is of paramount importance that high schools consider targeted academic support, particularly in subjects that serve as gateways to STEM-related fields and other professional careers.

The findings note the significant role that schools play in guiding high school learners through their post-matric decision-making process. Structured support systems such as career days, motivational sessions and access to information contribute significantly to shaping learners' aspirations and preparing them for life beyond matric. Moreover, the recognition of diverse career pathways, including entrepreneurship, highlights an evolving approach that acknowledges multiple post-school trajectories. However, academic challenges, particularly in subjects like English, Mathematics and Science – pose significant barriers to learners' aspirations. As such, high schools and other community-based organisations should consider investing in targeted support offered to learners.

## **Discussion**

This study contributes to understanding how rural high school learners in South Africa make post-matric career decisions amid structural and personal constraints.

While most learners aspired to pursue higher education as a route to upward mobility (Dipitso, 2021; Muyambi & Ahiaku, 2025), their choices were shaped not only by ambition but also by limited resources, family expectations and the influence of community role models. In this regard, Krumboltz's (1996) social learning theory of career decision-making provides a useful lens to interpret the interaction between individual agency and structural limitations.

The study provides insights into how Krumboltz's four theoretical elements (genetic endowment, environmental conditions, learning experiences and task approach skills) manifest in rural South African contexts. For example, learners' aspirations to specific careers and professions were linked to their inner interests and subject strengths (genetic endowment), yet these interests were hindered by limited educational exposure and academic underperformance, particularly in subjects such as Mathematics and English. This supports prior findings that academic preparedness remains a barrier to accessing high-demand fields (Albien & Naidoo, 2018; Reynolds & Moyo, 2024). The most significant influence on learners' career and post-matric decisions are prevailing environmental conditions such as poverty, geographic isolation and under-resourced schools. However, learners responded to these constraints in distinct ways, with some opting for employment as a short-term strategy to support future studies or gain work experience, while others pursued entrepreneurship as a long-term path to financial independence. Financial insecurity and family responsibilities emerged as key drivers behind high school learners' decisions to delay university, seek employment or pursue entrepreneurship (Francis & Webster, 2019). These findings affirm Krumboltz's emphasis on the impact of the external environment and align with studies that show how youth in marginalised settings make strategic compromises in pursuit of long-term goals (Francis & Webster, 2019; Musariwa & Tinonetsana, 2023).

Learning experiences were also shaped by limited exposure to diverse career options. High school learners in this study based their decisions on what they observed in their communities, including the occupations of teachers, domestic workers or small business owners. This echoes existing research showing that role models and localised experience significantly influence learners' post-matric decisions (Dina & Putra, 2022; Kim et al., 2016; Matshabane, 2016). Where structured career interventions such as career days were provided, high school learners reported feeling more informed and motivated to plan for the future. In addition, learners demonstrated task approach skills, such as resilience, determination and decision-making confidence in how they navigated their career options. Many expressed plans to work part-time while studying or to postpone further education to earn money. These adaptive strategies reflect a form of problem-solving that allows learners to maintain their aspirations despite limited resources. Such behaviours align with studies highlighting that rural youth often develop resilience-based coping mechanisms in the face of constrained opportunity structures (Hirschi, 2019; Rowland, 2014).

While previous literature documented barriers to rural youth transitions (Abrahams et al., 2015; Maila & Ross, 2018), this study contributes both theoretically and empirically by demonstrating how these barriers intersect with learners' aspirations and local knowledge systems. Unlike urban learners who often benefit from access to digital platforms, professional career counselling and broader networks, the learners in this study relied primarily on peer advice, informal school support and family narratives to navigate their options. Furthermore, the clear distinction between employment as a transitional strategy and entrepreneurship as an aspirational goal highlights the need for differentiated forms of career support and targeted interventions. The findings also highlight the dual role of schools as both enablers and sites of limitation. Career days and motivational talks were perceived as helpful, aligning with research that shows even low-cost interventions can boost learner motivation and awareness (Brodowicz, 2024; Miles & Naidoo, 2016). Yet many rural schools lack the capacity to provide targeted academic support in core subjects, thereby limiting learners' access to tertiary options and other post-matric options. Additionally, while some learners showed strong interest in entrepreneurship, there was little evidence of structured school-based support for this pathway. This reinforces the call for integrated entrepreneurship education in secondary schools (Burger et al., 2004; Musariwa & Tinonetsana, 2023).

Lastly, while learners expressed interest in entrepreneurship, there was limited evidence of structured entrepreneurial training or mentorship at the school level. This points to an overlooked area in school-based career development strategies and affirms the call for embedding entrepreneurship education into the secondary school curriculum (Musariwa & Tinonetsana, 2023). Such initiatives could be crucial for learners who view self-employment as a primary pathway rather than a fallback option.

This study contributes to contextualising Krumboltz's theory within the realities of rural South African high school learners. The study calls for career guidance and support systems that are responsive to high school learners' lived socio-economic conditions. Addressing the post-matric needs of rural youth will require structural reforms, including increased funding, targeted academic support and equal access to opportunities, and school-based interventions that empower learners to exercise informed agency over their future trajectories.

## Conclusion

The study highlights the complex and multifaceted nature of post-matric decision-making among high school learners in Mpumalanga, South Africa. While many learners aspire to pursue higher education as a means of social mobility and overcoming adverse socio-economic constraints, limited university spaces and academic under-preparedness present significant barriers for rural matriculants. In response to these constraints, some learners opt for immediate employment as a short-term strategy to earn income, either to support their

families or to fund future studies. However, high rates of youth unemployment and precarious job prospects make this path uncertain. Other learners, by contrast, view entrepreneurship as a long-term pathway to economic independence and as a means to overcome exclusion from formal job markets. These learners often see self-employment as an aspirational strategy to create opportunities and address family financial hardship. Yet this path is also hindered by limited access to startup capital, training and school-based entrepreneurial support. The findings point out the critical role of career guidance in helping learners navigate these choices, yet many rural schools lack adequate resources to provide structured support. Addressing these challenges requires a coordinated effort to expand career counselling services, improve financial aid accessibility and promote alternative pathways, such as vocational education and entrepreneurship training. This study shows that rural high school learners' decision-making about what to do after matric is strongly influenced by poverty, disparate access to resources and unequal opportunities in their setting. Supporting these learners with their career aspirations requires focused and fair support strategies, considering the specific challenges they face in rural schools across South Africa.

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## Authors' contributions

B.S. is the corresponding author of the original manuscript and contributed to the original research idea, analysis, manuscript writing and review. P.B. contributed to the original research idea, analysis, manuscript writing and review. E.M.P. contributed to the original research idea, analysis, manuscript writing and review. K.N. contributed to the original research idea, analysis, manuscript writing and review.

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## Data availability

Data are available and can be accessed from the corresponding author, B.S., upon request.

## Disclaimer

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