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**South African youth education and career aspirations before and after
Covid-19**

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DECLARATION OF AUTHENTICITY

I, **Portia A Mangwedi** declare that this dissertation is my original work. This work has not been previously submitted in whole, or in part, for the award of any degree. Each significant contribution to, and quotation in, this dissertation from the work, or works, of other people has been attributed, and has been cited and referenced in accordance with the requirements of the Department of Sociology, Faculty of Humanities at the University of Pretoria.

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Date.....

ABSTRACT

This study explored the experiences and investigated the extent to which the Covid-19 pandemic has changed the education and career aspirations of young people in South Africa, with particular focus on Soshanguve, a township north of Pretoria. Conceptually guided by the developing and achieving aspirations framework, the study specifically aimed to:

- explore the education and career aspirations of young people in South Africa before the Covid 19 pandemic;
- understand the main factors underlying the pre-Covid-19 education and career aspirations;
- explore the extent to which the Covid-19 has changed young people’s education and career aspirations; and
- recommend ways in which future youth employment interventions can incorporate youth aspirations.

To achieve its objectives, the study adopted a qualitative research design and collected data from 20 young men and women who were either in high school or were transitioning to a university or tertiary institution during the height of Covid-19. The data was collected using in-depth interviews and a semi-structured interview guide. Snowball sampling was used as a sampling procedure for this study which allowed respondents to provide information not only about themselves but also give referrals about other participants who meet the requirements of the study. with the referrals from the respondents, it was easy to find subjects for the study.

The overall finding and conclusion of the study is that even though the Covid-19 pandemic brought about uncertainties in young people’s lives their pre-Covid education and career aspirations remain. Most respondents still want to pursue tertiary education and embark on various careers. Respondents who want to be entrepreneurs believe they must first get academic knowledge from tertiary institutions to build a solid foundation for their businesses. While it emerged that structural constraints, family, community, and social values greatly influence young people’s education and career aspirations, the consensus among young people is that there is a need for government to financially and practically support them to ensure that youth aspirations are attended in the post-pandemic period.

Based on this overall study finding, the following recommendations were made for policy, practice, and further research.

- The government should provide necessary skills, support, and funds to improve young people’s access to tertiary education including vocational education where they can learn various skills.

- Skills centres should be established in resource-strained communities such as Soshanguve to enhance youth aspirations as well as to equip the youth of South Africa with important skills that are relevant in the current labour market.
- There should be regular career exhibitions or workshops by government, the private sector, and community-based organisations to expose young people to different fields and to equip them with any information they might need to decide on the careers they want to pursue.
- Platforms should be created to allow successful community members to regularly encourage or motivate young people through talks, or workshops which will empower young people.
- Given the paucity of research on youth aspirations especially in communities of low socio-economic status, a much larger study ideally using a mixed method approach is recommended.

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Chapter One: Introduction

1.1 Background

With a focus on Soshanguve, a township North of Pretoria, this study explored the career and education aspirations of young people in South Africa before and after the Covid-19 pandemic. Broadly defined, aspirations are forward-looking behaviour that “capture the personal desires of individuals (preferences and goals), their beliefs about the opportunities available to them in society (opportunities and pathways) and their expectations about what can be achieved through their own effort in an uncertain future (self-efficacy and agency)” (Gardiner & Goedhuys, 2020:9). Aspirations are future-oriented, driven by conscious and unconscious motivations, and are indicative of an individual’s commitments towards a particular trajectory or end point (Hart, 2016:326).

Previous studies, (for example, Appadurai, 2004:67) have noted that “aspirations are never simply individual. They are always formed in interaction and in the thick of life” and can include ideals for making a difference and achieving, among other things, personal happiness, job satisfaction, status, and wealth (Hart, 2012 cited in Hart 2016). According to Hart (2016), notwithstanding their various forms, roots, and purposes, aspirations are a central component of many individuals’ future decisions, course of action and improved wellbeing. In essence,

Aspirations matter as signifiers of what has come to have meaning and value for us as individuals, or as social groups. They offer guidelines and navigational reference points, lode stars for action. ... Aspirations matter because they are a manifestation of the freedom to aspire which is valuable for human flourishing. ... The kinds of aspirations youth have influence the kinds of capabilities for which they strive. Thus, control in the development of aspirations can indirectly impact on an individual’s well-being and freedom (Hart, 2016: 336)

For youth, aspirations are particularly important because they often influence how young people think and feel about themselves, how they make life choices, and the directions their lives take (Leavy & Smith, 2010). For example, educational aspirations – are defined as “idealistic values that reflect the educational attainment that one hopes and desires to achieve” (Chen & Hesketh, 2021:1) reflect one's subjective probability that they will reach a certain level of education. To this end, education aspirations are strong predictors of educational trajectories and variety of other relevant outcomes such as education attainment and/or attrition among young people (Carter, 2001; Fraser & Garg, 2011; Dobewall et al, 2019). Career aspirations are another form of aspirations important for young people’s careers. They are defined as long term career dreams one wants to achieve in their future professional life than short term dreams in the present (Gardiner & Goedhuys, 2020), such

aspirations are facilitators of career decisions and often direct young people's education and occupational choices and vice versa (Gardiner & Goedhuys, 2020).

Against the foregoing, it has been argued that young people with clear education and career aspirations are more likely to live a more satisfactory life than their counterparts who do not aspire or lack a clear pathway of achieving their dreams and/or desired lives (De Costa, et al, 2022). Economic studies of well-being have also found that young people with high aspirations tend to have better outcomes in a range of areas from health to the labour market (Graham & Pozuelo, 2022). Conversely, poor career and education aspirations have been associated with low education attainment and poor transition from school to work which may contribute to, among other things, low employment rates, employment in precarious sectors or occupations, and job dissatisfaction among young people (Perry et al. 2016; Lorenceau et al., 2021). Given that youth unemployment leads to many negative outcomes and multiple scarring effects in terms of material, psychosocial and mental wellbeing. (McQuaid, 2017; Honwana, 2012; Kazadi, 2020; Wang et al., 2020), obtaining a deeper understanding of the importance of young people's education and career aspirations is one critical way of ensuring that their life goals are not neglected (Boateng & Lowe, 2018; Gardiner & Goedhuys, 2020). Otherwise, when young people feel that the achievement of their life aspirations is severely curtailed by lack of opportunities to actualize their goals, ramifications such as increased delinquency, high levels of crime and other antisocial behaviours are likely to occur (Kabiru et al, 2014:3). For example, among the major explanatory factors for the Arab Spring – a revolutionary wave of series of anti-government protests, demonstrations, and armed rebellions that spread across much of the Arab world in the late 2010 and early 2011 (Salih, 2013) – has the largest percentage of educated, unemployed, dissatisfied, and angry youth cohort within the entire population (Hoffman & Jamal, 2012).

It is against the foregoing background that this study aimed to explore young people in South Africa's career and education aspirations before and after the advent of the Covid-19 pandemic. Although previous South African studies have been conducted on these youth aspirations before the pandemic (for example Fadiji & Reddy, 2020 on educational aspirations and du Plessis & Ahmed, 2020 on career aspirations) it is noteworthy that aspirations may change because of the new experiences and interactions with the social and academic environment (Graham & Pozuelo, 2020). To this end, Graham and Pozuelo argue, as individuals' understanding of the world and what is possible changes, they may realign their behaviour with the difficult and/or different realities in their situations. The socio-economic disruptions brought about by Covid-19 therefore makes this study timely and relevant as previous studies have shown that young people who complete school and their degrees in periods of, or following recessions often face an array of socioeconomic challenges (Schwandt & von Wachter). The **main research question** is: *“To what extent has*

the Covid-19 pandemic changed the career and education aspirations of young people in South Africa?”

1.2 Problem statement

South Africa was among the countries most hard-hit countries by the Covid-19 pandemic. The country’s first Covid-19 case was announced on March 5, 2020. By March 15, 2020, the number of cases had risen to 61. This was the beginning of almost two years of notable increases in the number of daily deaths, the best indicator of the progression of the pandemic¹.

In order to curb the spread and impact of the pandemic, South Africa like many other countries around the world, implemented a range of public health measures such as regular washing of hands, regular disinfection of surfaces and hands, and the wearing of face masks in public (Hartley & Perencevich, 2020; Pan et al., 2020). In addition, various community mitigation strategies – described as measures that people, and communities can take to slow the spread of infection during a period when vaccines and/or medical treatments were not available (Anderson et al, 2020) – were implemented. These included restriction of public gatherings, closure of schools, closing of national borders, and national lockdowns. While all sectors of the economy were affected particularly by the latter, the education and employment sectors were more so.

For this study, the school closures of school, which was considered to be one of the most efficient interventions to curb the spread of the virus, is relevant (Hammerstein et al, 2021). All in all, emerging literature is consistently showing that school closures had a negative impact on student achievement, specifically for students from families with low socioeconomic status who tend to have fewer educational opportunities beyond school (Hammerstein et al, 2021). There was also a notable increase in dropout rates as the protracted school closures and economic shocks forced some learners from poor backgrounds to enter the labour market to work and generate income for their financially distressed families (UNESCO, 2020). According to a July 2021 UNICEF report on South Africa:

The impact of disrupted education since the Covid-19 outbreak has been devastating, with learners between 75 per cent and a full school year behind where they should be. ... Rotational attendance, sporadic school closures and days off for specific grades, have resulted in school children losing 54 per cent of learning time (UNICEF, 2021:1).

The report further showed how school closures affected young people’s aspirations:

Being out of school does not only lead to learning loss but mental distress, exposure to violence and abuse, missed school-based meals and reduced development of social skills. In the longer-term, the skills needed to transition into working lives will be affected (UNICEF, 2021:1)

Online/remote and blended teaching and learning was widely adopted as one way of retaining school enrolment and learning globally (Adedoyin & Soykan, 2020). In South Africa, however, UNICEF (2021:1) reported that

The switch to blended learning, following the Covid-19 outbreak, was quick and included rotational classes, as well as access to online, radio and TV educational resources. ... [This] remote learning was a lifeline for some children but for the most vulnerable in South Africa, even this was out of reach ... Access to the devices, data, and skills necessary to navigate online resources was simply not possible for many children

In terms of the economic sector, the pandemic resulted in a massive decline in demand/supply of many industries and reduced productivity due to global supply chain disruptions and closures of factories (Arndt et al., 2020; Pak et al, 2020). A major consequence of this was an increase in unemployment especially among young people. For example, the International Labour Organisation (2021:1) reported that, “The Covid-19 crisis had severely affected labour markets around the world, hurting young people more than other age groups. Globally, youth employment increased by 8.7 per cent in 2020 compared with 3.7 per cent for adults”.

Although “South Africa entered the Covid-19 pandemic with low levels of employment and a decade of weak job creation, far below the standards of most upper middle-income countries” (World Bank, 2021:1), the pandemic worsened the situation for young people. At the end of 2020 it was reported that:

Young people [in South Africa] face acute unemployment rates, with incidence twice as high as among older age groups. Among 15–24-year-olds, 63% are unemployed and looking for work, whereas among 25–34-year-olds, this rate reaches 41%. When discouraged workers were included, unemployment rates was as high as 74% for 15–24-year-olds and 51% for 25–34-year-olds (World Bank, 2021:1)

Another impact of the Covid-19 on the labour sector was that most apprenticeships and internships services that was to expose young people to the workplace for the first time to acquire skills was closed (ILO-OECD, 2020).

Overall, the fragility and uncertainty that was witnessed in the education and economic sectors suggests that the educational and career aspirations of young South African could be impacted by the pandemic. Indeed, as De Costa et al (2022:1) pointed out:

As the pandemic spread across the globe, it became more apparent that young people and their aspirations would be particularly affected by the Covid-19 crisis in terms of employment, education, and training opportunities due to a pandemic-specific combination of simultaneous labour market challenges.

1.4 Aim and objectives of the study

The broad objective of this study was to explore the extent to which the Covid-19 pandemic has changed the education and career aspirations of young people in South Africa. The specific objectives are as follows:

1. To explore the education and career aspirations of young people in South Africa before Covid-19.
2. To understand the main factors underlying the pre-Covid-19 education and career aspirations
3. To explore the extent to which the Covid-19 has changed young people's education and career aspirations
4. To recommend ways in which future interventions can support youth aspirations in the post-Covid 19 era.

1.5 Significance of the study

This study has both theoretical and policy significance. It has been argued that to achieve full human development the need for a multi-dimensional view of aspirations as well as a deeper understanding of the combination of influences that precede and shape aspirations and the relationship to capabilities and functioning is of importance (Hart 2016). Thus, given that young people comprise over a third of South Africa's population (Statistics South Africa, 2019), understanding their aspirations is important for the country to achieve its human development commitments including attaining the ideals of the United National Agenda 2030 which underscores, among other things, the importance of youth in achieving the Sustainable Development Goals (United Nations, 2019).

The study also contributes to closing the current gaps in South African literature on youth aspirations in that many of the previous studies have been largely quantitative and more focused on non-marginalised youth (see for example, du Plessis, 2020, Hadjar et al., 2021). This study provides an important qualitative perspective as well as insights from young people from lower socio-economic backgrounds.

Given that the creation of employment opportunities is, according to the National Development Plan 2030, one of the South African Government's priority areas (National Development Commission, 2012), the study is also important as its findings will be useful in the development of effective employment policies (De Costa et al, 2022:1). According to De Costa and colleagues, youth-focused policies should be designed to allow educational and career aspirations of the young people to align with pathways to achieving them. Otherwise, employment policies that aim, for example, to match skills with labour market opportunities may fail young people whose aspirations are not considered (Gardenier & Godhuys, 2020; De Costa et al., 2022).

The study's focus on the Covid-19 pandemic is important given the several bleak predictions of the post-Covid-19 world for young people. According to Schwandt and Von Wachter (2020:16), for example, "Not only will the Covid-19 recession give new entrants to the job market a rocky start to their careers, but it will also put them at risk to make less money for decades, commit more crimes, have less satisfying family lives, and even die earlier than luckier job seekers". Statements such as these underscore the critical need to understand, in detail, the predicament that Covid-19 brought to the lives of young people and to use the evidence to inform post-covid-19 policymaking in relation to youth employment and overall development. Indeed, as the ILO (2020:3) asserts, by working together with and for youth, we can prevent the Covid-19 crisis from having a negative and potentially long-lasting impact on young people's lives.

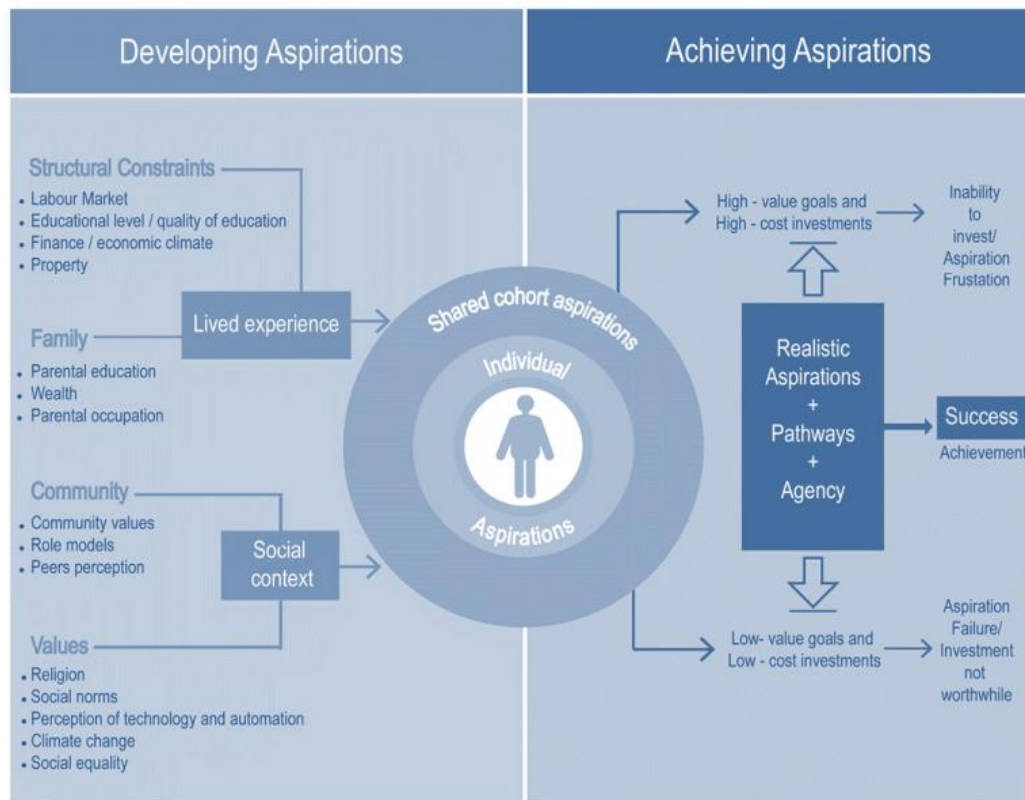
1.6 Conceptual framework

This study was conceptually guided by a developing and achieving aspirations framework noted by Boateng and Lowe (2018). Based on theories of habitus, aspiration, and hope (Calhoun *et al.*, 1993; Ray, 2006; Snyder, 2002), this framework posits that aspirations are shaped by structural constraints, lived experience within the family, and the social context shaped by the community and societal values. In terms of *structural constraints*, the framework looks at factors such as the dimension and dynamics of the labour market, the economic climate, as well as the level and quality of education in the population. In terms of lived experiences within the *family*, the framework highlights the role of parental education and occupations as well as family wealth in the development of aspirations.

Thirdly, in terms of social context, the framework looks at *community* values, as well as the extent to which role models within the community and the perceptions of peers shape aspirations. Finally, social messages and values communicated by societal institutions such as religious organisations, the media as well as by technology and sociocultural norms are also seen by the framework as important in the development of aspirations.

Portrayed in Figure 1.1 below, developing and achieving aspirations framework was deemed appropriate for this study as it looks specifically at developing and achieving young people’s aspirations and has been widely used to study young people’s education and career aspirations in other developing countries (Gardiner & Goedhuys, 2020)

Figure 1.1 Developing and achieving aspirations framework



Source: Gardiner and Goedhuys (2020)

1.7 Structure of the dissertation

In addition to this introductory chapter which provides a background to the study, this dissertation comprises of following four additional chapters. *Chapter 2* provides a literature review. *Chapter 3* is a discussion on the methodology used. *Chapter 4* details the key findings, and *Chapter 5*, the last chapter, concludes the dissertation by summarising the key findings and presenting recommendations for policy, practice, and further research.

Chapter 2: Literature review

2.1 Introduction

To ensure that the dissertation is grounded on the previous and existing research evidence, this chapter reviews global literature on the key factors that shape young people's aspirations in general, education and career aspirations. Thus, in line with the study's theoretical framework, the focus is on the role of structural constraints, lived experiences within the family, as well as the context shaped by the community, and societal values. Global literature on education and career aspirations of young people before and during Covid-19 will also be explored.

2.2 Factors shaping educational and career aspirations

As stated in Chapter 1, at the structural level, youth aspirations can be shaped by factors such as the dimension and dynamics of the labour market, the economic climate, as well as the level and quality of education in the population. With regards to the labour market (Gardiner et al., 2021) argue that technological, social, and economic forces that shape the labour supply and demand has the potential to shift a range of realistic aspirations. It is argued, for example, that increased automation and/or robotization of the workplace may replace workers with machines has the potential to drive low-skilled workers and, increasingly, medium-skilled people out of the market, thus decreasing the likelihood of these workers to find others job, earn decent incomes (Gardiner et al., 2021). It is noted by Lorenceau *et al.* (2021) that young people's career aspirations have little link with projected and current labour demand causing a huge gap amongst the reality of labour market and young people's education and career aspirations. In that sense, these technological changes swipe away aspirations of those who had hoped to work in the skilled jobs or occupations (Gardiner et al., 2021).

Along with technological change, forces such as minimum wage structures, provision of social security benefits and as well as employer-employee relationships can both shape labour market conditions and potential workers' aspirations for example, more flexible labour markets can fuel the education and career aspirations of young people who want to combine life quality, jobs with study or family (Gardiner et al., 2021). Overall, therefore, it can be argued that labour market forces and labour market policies jointly determine how narrow or wide the realistic aspirations window is that can be achieved for any given skills set. A limited range of realistic aspirations for a given skills set can motivate people to engage in education and skills development to open more perspectives, feeding into new future aspirations.

In terms of level and quality of education, Tzenis (2021) assert that higher education plays a vital role in influencing career opportunities of young people's aspirations to support their livelihood in the future. The quality of education one has exposes them to being a force of social change, feel respected and feel a sense of dignity which helps broaden young people's opportunities. Furthermore, if one's parents reached higher education, this can influence their children's educational aspirations to reach similar or even higher educational levels (Fraser & Grag, 2011). Naafs and Skelton (2018), assert that the level and quality of formal education together with labour markets, urbanisation, and shifts in the region's unpredictable economies can spark possibilities of what can be a needed lifestyle and livelihood to young people. This is because the quality of education changes the expectations young people could have with regards to their idea of educational aspirations and the type of jobs they value. For this reason, the level of education broadens one's social achievement, prospects and offers knowledge and skills that young people need to imagine better futures for themselves (Stambach, 2017). The level and quality of education creates its own opportunities and development goals towards young people's educational and career aspirations. Furthermore, Hynniewta (2021:217) state that "there is a link between the type of education and job opportunities where those with practical education, those with undergraduate and postgraduate and above level of education have better job opportunities as they constitute the higher divisions of the occupational categories". Nevertheless, Welch (2011), state that the level and quality of education is not just expanding young people's educational aspirations, but it was also becoming more international, diverse and commercial influencing young people's career aspirations and making better job choices.

Family

Social background in the form of families is important as the endowers of young people's capital that can, among other things, provide access a variety of resources that can promote educational success and shape career aspirations (De Coulon *et al.*, 2008). For example, a study in Singapore (Ng & Choo, 2021) found that parental education has important effects on adolescents' educational aspiration as mediated through educational track and adolescents' financial stress and self-esteem. Indeed, drawing from several studies conducted in different societies with regards to factors that contribute to shaping young people's education and career aspirations, Ntshayintshayi (2020) concluded that family was a crucial number one factor as it can weaken or reinforce individual growth and choices of young people. Agger *et al.*, (2018) assert that family as a support and role model have influence on young people's conception about educational and career opportunities. For example, if one's parents are professional engineers, one is more likely to aspire to be an engineer because of the income they make or less likely to aspire to be an engineer because of what their careers involve and require from them. In other word, if a young person's parents are educated, the young person may be inspired to also be educated. However, they might not always aspire to follow the same profession as their parents' if they deem these professions to be demanding. Children

whose parents are in managerial or professional occupations are also highly likely to aspire and enrol in higher education (Zimmermann, 2020).

Along with student grades and attitudinal factors, parental expectations have also been found to be alignment with high aspirations among young people (Madeeha et al, 2022). It has been shown, for example, that parents with low literacy skills are the least supportive and encouraging in relation to education. As a result, young people with such parents were more likely to report dissatisfaction with school and develop low educational and career aspirations (Shah & Tirmazee, 2020). Similarly, Baars (et al, 2016) found that among working-class families in the UK, children with neither parent holding a university degree are unlikely to aspire to a university education themselves. Conversely, students immigrant families in many developed countries, especially those coming from low socioeconomic backgrounds, have been found to tend to view higher education as a necessity for upward social mobility and hence aspire to enrol in college (Friberg, 2019; Hadjar & Scharf, 2019).

All in all, family support encourages young people to devote bigger effort to learning and school tasks which then influence and encourages their education and career aspirations for their future (Shao et al, 2021).

Family wealth or socioeconomic status plays a vital role in shaping young people's educational and career aspirations. Studies in this regard for example (Cen and Aytac, 2017) have argued that the socio-economic background of household or educational achievements of young people's families provides an understating link between family factors contributing to positive young people's educational and career aspirations. Wealth is essentially associated with networks, market opportunities, and connections of the individual which are important elements of the individual's probability of unemployment context (Hall & Klitgaard, 2011). To this end, family wealth plays a vital role in influencing young people's attitudes, education and career aspirations in that if one is from a wealthy family they get to be exposed to the best schools, have mentors who help them make life changing decisions and get to make networks with high profile people in terms of job opportunities unlike young people from poor backgrounds (Hall & Klitgaard, 2011) .As Palos and Drobot (2010: 3407) assert:

“The family's financial capital represented by the material support which would give access to resources and information gathering activities of a vocational nature to young people, the human capital – namely skills and abilities that parents have at their disposal and use in the support given to young people so that the young person in turn can develop vocational skills, give the young people a context favorable to academic development, and vocational aspirations and choices in life”.

Social context

Broader social values that are learned from the community and/or taught at school, in religious institutions or broadcast or published on various media also have a great impact on young people's educational and career aspirations. Putnam (2016), for example, assert that "resilient and strong communities are the core of individual achievement" and they play a very big role in young people's lives and their aspirations. Fuller (2014) highlights that communities often serve as social supporters of young people and through this they can encourage trust and promote the education and career aspirations young people have. This is particularly evident where there is a strong relationship between families and schools in communities as these relationships can help young people to have realistic education and career aspirations which are more likely to promote and reinforce the values of the communities (Gardiner *et al.*, 2021). In essence:

Where young people have grown up in environments that do not encourage hope or meaningful aspirations, they may not believe that they should aspire to much and may lack the courage or skills to invest in their dreams (Boateng & Lowe, 2018). However, if these are learned behaviours then aspirations and the agency-thinking can also be taught and influenced. Both the process of developing aspirations and working towards them are behaviours that young people learn from their environment; Thus, communities are seen to play a very vital role in shaping young people's education and career aspirations.

Role models in communities are a powerful force for social learning to young people towards achieving their dreams (Morgenroth *et al.*, 2015). Role models affect the way young people view themselves and the world around them and ultimately affect decisions about how they conduct their lives, how they aim to achieve their goals in life (Brooks *et al.* 2018). In accordance with Morgenroth *et al.*, (2015), role models can be anyone a young person comes across, for example, it could be people presented by the media and literature, parents, teachers, pastors, or relatives. In terms of educational and career aspirations, teachers have been found to be important role models in helping young people with educational and career choices as well as great sources of direct and indirect encouragement to young people's schooling as well as in other areas of life that go beyond just teaching the education syllabus. For example, to exemplify appropriate professional conduct, a teacher should treat others with respect, show up on time at work and dress appropriately (Kearney & Levine, 2020).

Overall, having role models in the community tends to enable young people to develop holistically, as it facilitates young people's educational development, personal development, and social development for them to develop their own place in the society, reach their fullest potential and voice (Doyle, 2001). Role models can also influence young people positively by

building their self-esteems, self-confidence, and developing a world view which widens their horizons (Brooks et al. 2018).

Peer perception is another category of role modelling which play a vital role in young people's lives. This is because young people tend to imitate ways, ideas, and value systems of their various peer (Mani & Riley, 2019). To this end, the educational and career aspirations of young people are said to be influenced by the context in which they grow, where certain aspirations are by those they imitate or copy, including their social circle, and peers (Genicot & Ray, 2017). As young people grow, they start to gain independence and their peers seem to be important sources to influence them towards their educational and career aspirations, a yardstick against which to compare themselves with, a sense of what is socially valued (Boateng A. Banerjee, R. Benabou, and D. Mookherjee & Lowe, 2018). According to Gariner *et al.* (2021)

Peer perception, peer frame, or peer structure is perceived as a social reference point, which changes both educational and career aspirations and, therefore, risk-taking behaviour and actions where risk-taking behaviour changes along with aspirations when subjects are placed in peer perception or groups in which they suddenly find themselves at risk of losing what they have.

In terms of social context, values also play a vital role in shaping young people's education and career aspirations. For example, the values impacted by religious institutions can heavily influence the context in which young people grow up, including how appropriate certain aspirations are considered (Genicot & Ray, 2017). According to Nie (2018:88), "previous research has demonstrated that individual religious beliefs and practices are associated with educational outcomes". This finding can be partly attributed to the assertion that religion is a buffer against bad environmental influences and a source of resiliency as it adds legitimacy to regulations against bad behavior as noted by numerous studies leading to negative consequences (Buchardt, 2016). In a different vein, religious organizations have also been recognized for serving an important role in delivering social services such as education to communities that lack or have limited government-based facilities or where such facilities are ineffective and it is through this service provision that young people's educational and sometimes career aspirations can be shaped (Buchardt, 2016).

Values communicated by technology and/or the media are also crucial in shaping young people's aspirations (Yerevan, 2012). According to Yerevan, specific features of consuming media are constructive not only in terms of enlightening young people's preferences, but also from the point of view of sending inspirational messages to the social group in the most efficient way to spread motivation.

2.4 Conclusion

Using the developing and achieving aspirations Framework, this chapter presented a review of the literature from various sources on factors that shape young people's education and career aspirations. In general, the literature review suggest that young people's education and career aspirations are determined by a multidimensional set of factors. This finding is important to give a contextual background for studies such as this present one as well as in making recommendations for appropriate policies within the public and private sectors to promote and/or encourage realistic education and career aspirations among young people. The next chapter, Chapter 3 discusses this study's methodology.

Chapter 3: Methodology

3.1 Introduction

As stated in Chapter 1, the broad aim of this study was to explore the extent to which the Covid-19 pandemic has changed the education and career aspirations young people of South Africa. This chapter presents an overview of the methodology used to achieve this broad aim as well as the study's specific objectives. Defined by Leedy & Ormrod (2001:14) as "the general approach the researcher takes in carrying out the research project", a research methodology details, and justifies, the specific procedures used to identify, select, process, and analyse information about a topic. The ethical principles adhered to throughout the study and research process are also discussed.

The chapter is structured as follows. The next section (Section, 3.2) discusses the research design. This is followed by a brief description of the study research site (Soshanguve), the study participants and the way in which they are selected, a description of the study's main source of data as well as the methods of data collection. A discussion on the ethical considerations adhered to in undertaking the study is presented before the chapter concludes with a short summary section.

3.2 Research Design

Research design refers to the overall strategy that a researcher chooses to integrate the different components of the study in a logical and coherent way (Sarantakos, 2013). This study employed a qualitative research design which entails exploring and understanding the meaning individuals or groups ascribe to a social or human problem (Bryman, 2012:380). All in all, qualitative research refers to a process naturalistic inquiry that seeks an in-depth understanding of social phenomena within their natural setting. Unlike in quantitative research where analysis is shaped using statistics, in qualitative research the topic under study is examined from multiple points of view to understand and explain how people construct identities (Neuman, 2011). It is in line with this that this study adopted a qualitative design as the aim was to solicit young people's views and experiences on how covid-19 impacted their education and career aspirations.

3.3 Study setting

As stated earlier, the study setting was Soshanguve, a township situated about 30 km north of Pretoria, in the Gauteng Province of South Africa. At the time of the 2022 population census, the township had a population 879 000 (Statistics South Africa, 2022). Young men aged 15-24 years comprise 10.6 percent of the township's population and young women in the same age group comprise 10.8 percent. There are several schools including private and public

schools as well as tertiary institutions such as Tshwane University of Technology and Tsoga Art College. In terms of education, 35.0 percent of residents aged 20 years and above have a matric qualification, 10.4 percent have a higher education qualification, and only 5.6 percent have no schooling at all (Statistics South Africa, 2022). The economy of Soshanguve residents is sustained by entrepreneurship, innovation, and creativity. Many residents work in the informal and formal sectors of the township as well as in the larger Tshwane Municipality in which Pretoria falls.

3.4 Study participants

The study participants were a total of 20 young people: 10 young men and 10 young women, aged between 18 and 24 years. While the National Youth Policy defines youth as any persons between the ages of 14 and 35 years (Mkandawire, 2002: 5) this study's conceptualisation of young people is those aged 18-24 years was based on available evidence (see for example, Yerevan, 2012) identifying the period between 18-24 years as the transitioning age from high school to tertiary education or the workplace. Young people in this age bracket are thus more likely to have established education and career aspirations. The other inclusion criteria was that: the participants should have been enrolled in either a secondary school or a tertiary institution in 2019, the year the Covid-19 pandemic came to the fore. The participants were also expected to have been residents of Soshanguve for the five years prior to the year the Covid-19 pandemic came to the fore. The reason for this criterion was to ensure that the participants had adequate experience in, and views about the township to adequately contribute to the study. These overall criteria lead to a sample comprising of 20 participants who had matric as their highest qualification. At the time of data collection three young men and six young women were students in a higher education institution or university. The other six young men and three young women were on a gap year meaning these students were on a study break period (typically taken in the period after completing high school and going onto tertiary education), one young woman was upgrading (improving) her matric results to meet the requirements of the course they wanted to study, and one young man was working.

3.5 Selection of study population

The process for selecting participants for the study was done using the snowball sampling method which is a form of purposive sampling. Purposive sampling, also referred to as non-probability sampling, entails the selection or identification of study participants with specific characteristics or knowledge critical for answering the research question (Bryman, 2012). Snowball sampling, on the other hand, selects potential study participants through networks and referrals. That is, the researcher requests the initial study respondent to recommend additional respondents who meet the study's inclusion criteria (Bryman, 2012). This referral process helped the sample population build-up until the required number of participants was reached. This sampling method was deemed the most appropriate for this study because it allowed easy access to participants who met the inclusion criteria.

3.6 Data collection

Data was collected using face to face in-depth interviews amongst young people aged 18-25 years of age. This qualitative method involves conducting intensive individual interviews with a small number of respondents to explore respondents' opinion, ideas, views or perspective on a certain situation or idea (Sarantakos, 2013). These types of interviews were deemed the most appropriate for this study because they allow for a broader conversation between the researcher and respondent providing a wider perspective on how respondents' education and career aspirations were affected by the Covid-19.

Data was collected using a semi-structured interview guide (Appendix A) designed to solicit information on the extent to which structural constraints, the family, and the social context influences young people's education and career aspirations both prior and post Covid-19. Consistent with previous studies on young people's education and career aspirations (see, for example, Madeeha et al, 2022) the questions in the interview guide were single-question measures to determine young people's aspirations and hopes about their educational and career journeys. These single questions revolved around what young people would want to embark on doing after finishing high school, the level of education they would like to obtain or reach, and the jobs or careers they would want to pursue and why, etc.

Given that the interviews were conducted during Level 2 of the Covid-19 in South Africa, prevailing protocols of the time, specifically the maintenance of a minimum of 1.5 m social distancing, regular sanitising, and wearing of masks, was strictly adhered to. The interviews—which lasted between 45 minutes to an hour—were held at times and places convenient for the participants, also in a language they felt more comfortable to converse in. These emerged to be Sepedi and Setswana, the vernacular for most people in the township which I also speak fluently. Even though arrangements for translators to be on board if potential participants spoke other common languages in the township such as Xitsonga, Tshivenda, Isizulu and isiNdebele, the need for using the translator did not arise during the data collection. With the consent of all respondents, the interviews were audio-recorded.

3.7 Data analysis

After all data has been collected, all interview recordings were transcribed verbatim and translated to English. Subsequently, a thematic approach to data analysis was undertaken. Thematic analysis is a qualitative analytic method of identifying themes and patterns, analysing and reporting patterns within data (Kawulich & Holland, 2012:231). It entailed the process of organizing data conducted by means of categorizing the responses until prominent themes were identified and described. Thematic analysis allows flexibility as the researcher interprets the data therefore, the researcher carefully reflects on the interpretations and choices of respondents to avoid picking up on things that are not there. The findings were

compared and interpreted according to themes. With the information provided at the categories that developed from the data collected, meaning to the data was provided through themes found in the information (Creswell 2007).

3.8 Ethical considerations

The study was granted ethical approval by the Research Ethics Committee of the Faculty of Humanities at the University of Pretoria (See Appendix B). In line with this approval, basic principles of social research were adhered to throughout the study including during the write-up of the findings. These included informed consent, and ensuring no harm, confidentiality, and voluntary participation as the pillars of the study. All these principles are briefly described below:

3.8.1 Informed consent

According to Bryman (2012:138), the principle of informed consent is that in research, participants should be sufficiently informed to make an informed decision about whether they wish to participate in a study. Thus, the participants were made to understand the research, were well informed on the topic, knew what was expected of them. All in all, it was ensured that the participants understood what the research involved, specifically the procedure to be followed in interviews, the time demands, as well as the need to use audio recording. Before commencing with data collection, consent was obtained from the research participants using the consent form in Appendix C.

3.8.2 No harm to participants

Research that is likely to harm participants is regarded by most people as unacceptable (Bryman, 2012:135). It is important that research avoids any harm to participants whether physical or psychological harm. Thus, this study ensured that there was no harm done to any participants by creating a friendly environment for both the researcher and the respondent as recommended by Creswell (2007:132).

3.8.3 Confidentiality and privacy

The confidentiality of this study's respondents' details and the information they provided was strictly protected as it was one essential and vital ethical considerations especially when asking about people's experiences, private details, and beliefs. In particular, the respondents' names and identifications were kept private throughout the research process, and this will be maintained in the dissemination of the study results. To this end, all names stated in this dissertation are pseudonyms. Furthermore, the transcripts from the interviews was secured and kept in the form of soft copies in password protected computer.

3.8.4 Voluntary participation

Participants were informed that their participation in the study was voluntary. The researcher explained that failure to participate in the study or withdrawal at any stage would not result in any penalty or negative consequences for the participant.

3.9 Conclusion

This chapter provided a description of the study's methodology looking at the study design and a suitable approach was followed; a study setting was chosen to meet the objectives of the study; the profile and selection of study participants was done to ensure the trustworthiness of the study findings; methods of data collection and analysis; as well as the ethical considerations that was adhered to throughout the study. The next chapter presents the key findings of the study.

Chapter 4: Findings

4.1 Introduction

This chapter presents the study findings based on the empirical evidence obtained from the in-depth interviews with the young people who comprised the study population. The study's specific objectives were used as the presentation framework for the findings. Thus Section 4.2 highlights young people's education and career aspirations before and after Covid-19. Section 4.3 discusses the main factors underlying these pre-Covid-19 aspirations in line with the study's conceptual framework. In Section 4.4 the young people's aspirations after the onset of Covid-19 was presented and the extent to which the pandemic had influenced their aspirations is discussed. Recommendations for plausible interventions to support youth education and career aspirations was discussed in Section 4.5. The chapter ends with a concluding section, Section, 4.6.

4.2 Youth education and career aspirations before Covid-19

To explore young people's pre-Covid-19 aspirations two questions were posed to them. The first was: *Before 2020, what is the highest level of education that you had hope to attain? Please explain why.* The second questions were: *What future career were you most interested in pursuing for yourself? (What did you want to do when you grow up?). Please explain why.* These questions essentially aimed to achieve the study's first and second specific objectives. The responses showed that virtually all those who were in Grade 12 in 2019 (the year before the pandemic) had aspired to pass their matric and enrol for higher education while those who were in tertiary institutions aspired to be in their following year of study. The responses further revealed an implicit perception among respondents that the attainment of higher education somehow opens 'doors or opportunities. It is also consistent with previous assertions (for example, Altman et al, 2014:348) that "achieving high school graduation and some post-school education is an important contributor to labour market success. For example:

Before 2020 I had hoped to attain Grade 12 as my highest educational attainment. This is because when one passes their Grade 12 it opens university doors (Young woman, 20 years)

I am currently studying hospitality at Tshwane South TVET College Before 2020 the highest level of education I had hoped to attain is Grade 12 because having matric is an achievement and it's a key to many things (Young woman, 18 years)

Before 2020 the highest educational attainment I wanted to achieve was going to Grade 12 so I can get an entry level to universities and for job opportunities (Young man, 19 years)

In terms of the second question on career interests an interesting finding was the notable gender differences in career aspirations where female respondents were more likely to express interest in “caring” and/or soft professions such as medicine and teaching. For example:

Before 2020 I had hoped to attain grade 12 as my highest educational attainment. I was most interested in pursuing medicine and be a doctor as my future career (Young woman, 19 years)

Before 2020 I had hoped to attain my grade 12, get money to register at a college and further my studies. I was most interested in pursuing teaching at the foundation phase because I love working with children and I love children (Young woman, 23 years)

If there was anything I was looking forward to after my matric it was to go to higher education and study gynaecology. I was most interested in pursuing gynaecology as my future career while growing up I wanted to be a doctor. (Young woman, 19 years)

Young men, on the other hand, tended to express an interest in more traditionally male-dominated professions such as engineering, mechanics, etc. For example:

Before 2020 I had hoped to attain Grade 12, be financial stable and do my own thing. I was most interested in pursuing electrical engineering as a future career even when growing up because everything electricity fascinated me (Young man, 21 years)

Before 2020 the highest level of education I hoped to attain was passing my Grade 12 for me to start doing electrical engineering. Before covid-19 I wanted to pursue law but then I lost interest in the career as it was a field my parents chose for me. I then chose something I love which is electrical engineering (Young man, 20 years)

Before 2020 I hoped to attain a pass in my Grade 12 results and to get a university entry level because I doubt there is anyone who would want to finish school and not want to go to university. I wanted to be an engineer, but over and

over I realized it was not my passion and now I am interested in being a sound engineer (Young man, 19 years)

Before 2020 I hoped to finish my matric because I have been in school like forever, and I was tired of school. I was most interested in being a mechanic even growing up I wanted to be a mechanic because I love cars and everything about them (Young man, 20 years)

Before 2020 I wanted to pass my grade 11 and go to grade 12 so I can pursue being a fire fighter. For one to qualify as a fire fighter one must have Grade 12. Growing up I wanted to be a fire fighter however, now I want to pursue a career in the media industry specifically focusing on music and filming. (a 19 year-old young man).

I was most interested in being a private investigator as my future career because there is too much crime undercover. For me being a PI would mean I will help societies and crooked companies expose thieves (21-year-old young man).

4.3 Main factors underlying pre-Covid-19 education and career aspirations

The study revealed that while some respondents stated that they were not really inspired by anyone or anything, there are a number of factors underlying the young people's aspirations discussed above. In terms of the developing and achieving aspirations Framework it emerged that the main factors were lived experiences (particularly with family members) and the social context defined by the community (specifically role models such as successful community members and teachers) as well as the values transmitted through social media. The following subsections illustrate how the main factors shaped the young people's aspirations.

4.3.1 Family members

This study revealed that family members such as parents and siblings play a vital role in shaping many young people's education and career aspirations as the following excerpts illustrate.

I look up to my late mother because she did a lot of things. Even though she was a nurse, she tried by any means necessary to obtain other certificates and she would emphasize how important education is Before 2020 I had hoped to attain my BCom in business management at that time. My mom applied for an economics bursary for me at a company she was working at. Things changed and now I am doing science. Honestly, if it wasn't for my family, especially my

mother, I don't think I would be studying right now (Young woman 22 years old, currently studying for a Bachelor of Science)

I look up to my mother in terms of education and career aspirations. Although she underwent teenage pregnancy, she still managed to get her degree and she is now a teacher (young woman, 23 years, currently studying engineering)

My sister is the one who influenced my education aspirations because she is the first in the family to reach such a high level of education at university as no one in the family went to university. My career aspirations are influenced by my father because he is the one who is into businesses and with him by my side my love to be an entrepreneur grew (young man 19 years old, currently studying Business Information Technology and interested in entrepreneurship)

In addition to the immediate family, it emerged that members of the extended family members such as aunts, uncles and cousins also played a role in shaping the aspirations of some young people. For example:

I look up to my aunt Julia Tladi, after she did her matric, she went to the University of Pretoria to pursue her finance course. I want to do economic management sciences because I want to know more about the economy of our country. My aunt influenced my career aspiration as she did something within the commercial faculty. (a 20-year-old young women).

I look up to my uncle who inspires me in terms of my education and career aspirations. He took short courses, not only can he get a job for one thing which he qualifies for, but he gets to choose where he wants to work (Young man, 19 years currently on gap and wanting to study law)

Ausi [aunt] Tebogo is one of the family members who inspire me and influenced my educational aspirations of finishing my matric and study law as she is also a lawyer. I have learned a lot from her (young man 21 years old, wanting to study law)

I look up to a few of my mother's family members, one is a chartered accountant with so many businesses all over while the other one is my mother's cousin who is also a chartered accountant but works at a certain company. They are my mentors in pursuing my education aspirations (19-year-old male interested in sound engineering)

Some young people stated that their education and career aspirations were inspired by their families' material, financial and moral support. For example:

My education aspirations were influenced by my uncle because he is always there, he helped me with applications and money for application fees (young woman 20 years old)

My father is the one who influenced my education aspirations because he provided me with anything I could need for school ((young man 19 years old)

My father has influenced my education aspirations through his support for my schoolwork or anything that has to do with school he jumps because he only wants what's best for me. (21-year-old young woman).

My mother influenced my education aspirations because of the advice she would give me and the whole picture of education she sold to me (22-year-old young woman).

It also emerged that some young people's aspirations were influenced by their families current disadvantaged situation which they and/or their other family members recognised and expressed a desire to change. For example.

My educational aspirations are influenced by my sister Thato, each day she kept and keeps telling me to push as she couldn't get this far with her studies thus she looks up to me to be the first at home to make myself and them proud (young woman, 18 years).

My sister Dineo is the one who influenced my education aspirations because each time she'd tell me to go to school as they couldn't get this far with school. She'd remind me of our family situation and indeed I'd push at school. Dineo also influenced my career aspirations as she would push me to focus on my studies and she will then pay for my varsity fees when I obtain a university entry (young woman, 18 years).

My parents are my main influencers in terms of my education aspirations because they always remind me to go to school, how they failed to go to school has made them settle for less. This alone made me realise how important school is (Young man, 19 years)

4.3.2 Teachers

Consistent with previous studies (for example, Hagell *et al.* 2018) the study showed that some young people's educational and career aspirations were greatly inspired by their teachers who motivated and encouraged the young people to study hard and achieve their desired dreams and goals. The following excerpts illustrate:

My career aspirations were influenced by my high school teachers as they would always encourage us at school to go and further our studies and that education is the key to everything (20 year-old young woman).

One of my high school teachers influenced my career aspirations in that her love for teaching was unmatched. She encouraged us those who used to struggle in class that with hard work anything is achievable, she made me fall in love with teaching thus, before the Covid-19 pandemic I was very much confident that I will achieve my education and career aspirations, I was motivated and determined (a23 year-old young woman).

My career aspirations were influenced by my high school teachers as they would always encourage us at school to go and further our studies and that education is the key to everything (a 20-year-old young woman).

4.3.3 Community members

This study revealed that some community members also have some influence on the career and educational aspirations of young people living in their communities. For example:

Our community is actually not a bad community after all. I am saying this because some of us still have community members who inspire us to do our fullest. In my community I look up to a lady called Sylvia in terms of education and career aspirations because she has done very well for herself. After her grade 12 she was enrolled in one of the disciplined forces. She is now a qualified professional, although I am not sure which department she falls under at work. She used to tell us each time there were opportunities at her workplace, gave us forms to apply. and made sure we apply (a 18-year-old young woman).

In my community I look up to some guy called Tshepiso Modise, he is a guy whom I grew up around. He was studying teaching and he is now a qualified teacher and teaching at a school nearby. He now owns a car, and he is building a house at his home for his parents. He is a very cool guy who is sociable, and he inspires me a lot (a 19-year-old young man).

Furthermore, another young man stated this with so much excitement and passion:

In my community I look up to a guy called Alfred. I used to go to school with him, despite how many times he failed in school he is now a businessman, a forex trader, and a whole CEO of his own company at a neighbouring township around. He is doing very well for himself and with his experiences I get some much encouragement in that no matter how many times one falls, when they get up on their feet magical things happen. He inspires me to also want to be an entrepreneur and create jobs (a 19-year-old young man).

Despite the foregoing, some young people lamented that their community can also be a form of discouragement for young people in that community as members who are successful do not always share their experiences which will then motivate young people's education and career aspirations. For example, there are no organisation aimed at improving young people's lives or education related programmes which will encourage young people to have high aspirations. The following statements illustrate these sentiments further:

I don't look up to anyone in my community in terms of education and career aspirations because I don't think they are people who went to school and finished school to motivate me enough (19-year-old young man).

Another young man shared that

There is no one in the family nor in the community whom I look up to however, I want to be an inspiration or role model to the young ones both in the family and community coming after me (19-year-old young man).

4.3.4 Social media

Virtually all the young people interviewed for the study stated that they were "active on social media" with Facebook, Twitter and WhatsApp reported as the most used. Others such as Instagram and Pinterest were mentioned by only a few of the young people. The reason for using social media were varied but can be succinctly summarised by this statement from a 21-year-old man: "*it impacts my worldview, and it provides me with information, and I get news faster*". Others also stated that it is through social media that they get information on educational and job opportunities. For example, as one 19-year-old man said: "*Social media influences me in a good way because it is through social media where one sees when university applications are open and when there are job opportunities*".

It also emerged that it was also through the exposure on social media to various influencers and celebrities that young people's aspirations were shaped. For example:

On social media there was a guy by the name of Tshireletso Jele who inspired me and motivated me when I felt like giving up during my matric year. He'd post his marks and some motivational quotes. He motivated both my education and career aspirations as he is now a University of Johannesburg student and doing very well (19-year-old young woman).

The late Shona Ferguson is one of the prominent icons I look up to and who inspired me to want to pursue filming. Him starting his own company, being a director of his own series, series has truly inspired me to want to go all hands on for filming. Mpho Ngubane is also one of those who influenced my education and career aspirations as he is into music and videos that are often played on social media for the world to see (19-year-old young woman).

I am very much active on social media, I use WhatsApp, Facebook, Instagram, and mostly Twitter. Social media in terms of twitter its very encouraging there. The people I see there and the stories I read about are very much encouraging and positively influential. Most of the people in my life are people I met on twitter (22-year-old young woman).

4.4 Youth education and career aspirations after Covid-19

To achieve the study's third specific objective (exploring the extent to which Covid-19 changed young people's educational and career aspirations), they were asked: *In what ways would you say the pandemic has affected your educational aspirations?* and *in what ways would you say the pandemic has affected your career aspirations?* To give context to the responses to these questions, Table 4.1 below summarises the young people's pre-Covid aspirations and their current activities.

Table 4.1: Pre-Covid aspirations and main activity at time of study

Pre-Covid education/career aspiration	Current activity
1. To attain grade 12 and study gynaecology.	Didn't qualify to study gynaecology due to low marks. Currently just relaxing at home
2. To attain my BCom in Business Management	Studying clinical technology.
3. To attain Grade 12 and study Economic Management	On a gap year. Couldn't get into university due to financial constraints.
4. To attain Grade 12 and study electrical engineering	Studying Business Information Technology
5. To attain Grade 12 and study medicine	Studying Human Resource management
6. To attain Grade 12	On a gap year and unemployed however plans to go back to school next year as have been accepted to study at Boston City College
7. Attain was Grade 12, finish school and study accountancy	On a gap year because I didn't get space at the university

8. To finish my matric	Working. Couldn't get university entry, then decided to get a job to keep busy
9. To attain Grade 12, get money to register at a college and further studies. Most interested in pursuing teaching at the foundation phase	Not doing anything. However, wants to go back to school and pass my matric with good results the following year
10. To attain grade 12	Doing management assistant
11. To attain is grade 12,	Studying hospitality
12. Attain a pass for my grade 12 and go to varsity to study law	Studying to be a management assistant
13. To become a private investigator	Studying to be a management assistant
14. To pursue law after Grade 12	Doing certificate in electrical engineering and working
15. To attain a pass in my Grade 12 results to get a university entry level to study engineering	Upgrading, matric results and on a gap, year Going back to school next year to study sound engineering.
16. Attain Grade 12 and was most interested in pursuing law	On a gap year because wants to do some self-introspection and decide what exactly to pursue
17. Finish matric. Was most interested in being a mechanic	On a gap year because wanted to relax
18. To pass grade 12. Most interested in pursuing law as a career	Taking a gap year because didn't get the NSFAS funding for what they wanted to study (Law)
19. To pass grade 11 and go to grade 12 so can pursue being a fire fighter.	On a gap year and job hunting. Needs a job to gather or accumulate money to go back to school and further studies
20. Continue with my degree studies and complete in the year 2022.	Currently studying Electrical engineering

The table affirms the earlier finding that young people interviewed were, pre Covid-19, more interested in pursuing further studies. At the time of the interviews almost none of the young people interviewed were doing what they had aspired to do in terms of education. Those who were studying seemed to have been studying different fields from what they had dreamed of studying. For some financial constraints played a major role in this regard. For some, it was evident that the pandemic had an impact on their aspirations. For example:

The pandemic affected my career aspirations as I am a bit sceptical as to what tomorrow holds for the career path I chose now (Young woman, 19 years)

Due to Covid-19 my education aspirations have changed thus, I will not be pursuing the same educational aspirations because job opportunities are skewed and scarce. The covid-19 pandemic affected my career aspirations in that a lot of young people in the path I wanted to follow are retrenched (young man, 19 years)

Personally Covid-19 affected me negatively as we stayed home for close to two months with so many doubts and uncertainties regarding our futures as matriculants. I for one feared covid-19 and didn't know what tomorrow holds for

me. Due to covid-19 I no longer want to pursue studying law because of my matric results. I thought on upgrading but then time waits for no man so rather I will pursue something different like teaching (Young man, 19 years)

Although most young people did state that they were affected “negatively” by Covid-19 especially socially, the phrases to the effect of “*I still want to purpose my dreams*’ were recurrent in the interviews. For example.

Personally, the Covid-19 pandemic restricted me to do some of the things I used to do like socialize with my friends face-to-face, doing walk ins to hand in my applications, space limitations in schools. I still want to pursue the same educational dreams I had before the covid-19 pandemic because I am very passionate about my dream (Young woman, 20 years).

A lot of things changed and stopped during the outbreak covid-19, by then I had already applied at a tertiary institution and for the NSFAS Funding. The covid-19 affected my education and career aspirations in that it took two years of my life, I would be doing my second year at the university by now. If I get the opportunity and chance to go back to school/ university, I’d still want to pursue studying law (Young man, 21 years).

Personally, the pandemic affected me badly, I lived in fear, and I was scared to go anywhere. The pandemic affected my education aspirations because I was meant to go and rewrite my matric then we were stopped due to the pandemic then I dropped out hoping to start again the following year. given the socioeconomic impact of the covid-19 pandemic, I am still confident that I will achieve my education and career aspirations though financially my mother is struggling but she is trying (Young woman, 23 years).

Personally, the covid-19 pandemic has affected me negatively as I was restricted to do so many things that I used to do before. It was hard for me. The pandemic affected my education aspirations in that I aimed high for my results unfortunately I didn’t get what I expected because of how we used to go to school, I lost focus at some point. I still want to pursue the same educational dreams I had before covid-19 pandemic because I really want to pursue acting, its my dream and what I love (Young woman, 18 years).

Personally covid-19 disappointed me as I never expected to experience such a life changing pandemic or situation. I submitted my schoolwork late because sometimes I didn’t have data. I passed my matric but not with the marks or results

I aimed to get for myself. I still want to pursue the same dreams I had before covid-19 because I am passionate about being a private investigator (Young man, 21 years)

The foregoing suggests that many young people saw Covid-19 as more a major setback but not really the ‘end of the road’. Some saw the pandemic as having presented an opportunity for innovation and/or rethinking aspirations largely due to the limited job opportunities that are now available. This has led some young people to change their aspirations and try to align them to what they think the labour market now demands. For example:

Despite the drastic changes brought about by Covid-19 I still want to pursue the same aspirations I had before which is opening my own business. For me Covid-19 was just a wakeup call that not only should we all settle for going to school, but the must be entrepreneurs who will create jobs for other young people seeing that the economy was badly affected, and people were retrenched (19-year-old young man).

For me I think the pandemic made my peers think and work hard as I saw some of them try to sell things to make ends meet, so many of them started to do things that will bring them money though they are unemployed. Unemployment has been there before Covid-19 however when Covid-19 came it was just a reminder that young people are on their own and it’s up to them to make sure they survive (22-year-old young woman).

Personally, the Covid-19 pandemic gave me time to think as there was nothing to do nor do. I had time to think what it is really that I wanted to do, it gave me space to grow, I noticed few characters I didn’t know I had, I ran a business, and it was a success (20-year-old young woman)

4.5 Plausible interventions to support youth aspirations

Given the overall acknowledgment of the negative impact of Covid-19, the young people were asked what they thought the government and/or society could do to assist young people achieve their dreams in the post-Covid-19 era. The responses to these questions revolved around the provision of financial support for further education as well as for the creation of job opportunities. This clearly affirmed earlier findings that most young people aspired to attain higher education and to acquire some skills. To this end, the young people were of the view that the government should facilitate this by offering financial support in the form of bursaries and scholarships as well as the provisions more study centres and facilities. For example

The government can assist young people to achieve their dreams in the post covid-19 era by encouraging young people to go to school, provide job opportunities for graduates and provide bursaries for those who still wish to go to school (20-year-old young woman).

The government can assist young people achieve their dreams in the post covid-19 era by school and job opportunities, not that it's not trying but may it be hard on, on those opportunities. Most young people are no longer interested in what they want to do. The society of Soshanguve can assist by building a skills centre where computer literacy is being taught (21-year-old young woman).

The government can assist young people in South Africa achieve their dreams in the post-covid-19 era by finding us who are doing supplementary for our matric results to can be able to write, have teachers who specifically work in supplementary school so that we can consult and pass well. Some of us are slow to grasp information so having teachers whom you can go talk to will be better. (23-year-old young woman).

The government can assist young people to achieve their dreams in the post covid-19 era by creating more job opportunities and open a centre for those who dropped out to finish their studies while the successful people in the society of Soshanguve all gather to motivate and advise us on how they did it, how did they get there, maybe make donations to help young people to go to school (18 year-old young woman).

The government can assist young people achieve their dreams in the post-covid-19 era by supporting them, investing in their dreams through finances, giving them bursaries or scholarships and provide skills centres (20-year-old young man).

The government can assist young people achieve their dreams in the post covid-19 era by providing skills opportunities like the ones they provide in suburbs, bring successful and well-known engineers, nurses, doctors, psychologist to talk to us. Provide variety of sports in schools to aid future athletes (19-year-old young man).

Others thought that there should also be financial and mentorship for aspiring young entrepreneurs. For example.

The government can help young people achieve their dreams in the post Covid-19 era by funding entrepreneurs who want to start their businesses and those with businesses but lack funding to create more jobs. Then the society can assist by supporting local businesses and encourage young people to keep doing their best (19-year-old young man).

SA government should have skills centres at every community as this will enhance youth aspirations and equip the youth of South Africa with skills that they will use, for example if they are skilled, they can also open their own businesses and not solely rely on the government to create jobs but through the youth being entrepreneurs they themselves can create jobs. There should be career exhibitions or workshops promoted to expose the youth to different fields to equip them with any information they might need to decide on the careers they want to pursue. (23-year-old young woman).

4.6 Discussion

This chapter discussed the key findings of the study using the specific objectives as the presentation framework. In terms of the pre-Covid educational and career aspirations, the study found that virtually all the respondents interviewed aspired to reach the next level of education. Since most were in Grade 12 in 2019 (the year before the pandemic) their main aspirations was to pass their matric in 2020 and enrol for higher education. The few that were in tertiary institutions aspired to be in their following year of study.

An exploration of the key factors underlying these aspirations found that the educational attainment and occupations of immediate and extended family members shaped many of the young peoples' aspirations. Another pathway was through the material and moral support that family members gave to the respondents. The perceived lower socio-economic or disadvantaged status of some families also inspired young people from those families to aspire for higher education.

Within the social context, teachers were seen as key role models in the community. In addition, some successful community members who had notable achievements especially as entrepreneurs also inspired many young people. In terms of values, it was very clear that the media, especially the achievement of certain celebrities and social media influencers shaped young people's educational and career aspirations.

Although none of the young people interviewed explicitly mentioned that structural constraints influenced their aspirations, it was clear that many young people were aware of the difficulty of getting employment especially when one does not have tertiary education. To his end, it can be argued that there is an impact recognition among young people that the

labour is difficult to penetrate without higher education and/or skills. Hence structural constraints could be indirectly including the young people 's aspirations especially in relation to education as almost all of them aspired of completing their Grade 12 or matric and going on to further education.

In terms of the impact of the Covid-19 pandemic on young people's educational and career aspirations the study found that although its negative impact was widely acknowledged by the young people, few of the respondents became less educationally driven; most of them still wish to go back to school. However, many do not wish would want to pursue the same career aspirations they had before Covid-19 due to perceived skewed job opportunities of their previously aspired careers. Thus, can be argued that the pandemic seems to have somehow affected young people's career aspirations but not so much in terms of educational aspirations. At the same time, it can be argued that rather than abandoning their aspirations, many young people are finding ways to cope with the impact of the pandemic. Some are being more entrepreneurial while are looking at education, employment, and careers in a more multidimensional way. In essence, while the economic impact of the pandemic was more severe for young people living in lower-income households such as in the study site, this does not seem to have stopped the young people from aspiring and aiming for bigger things in their lives. It is to this end that virtually all of them are appealing to government for financial resources and other opportunities to ensure that their educational and career aspirations are realised.

The next chapter present a summary of the key findings and will conclude with a section outlining recommendations emanating from the key findings.

Chapter 5: Summary, conclusion, and recommendations

5.1 Introduction

The principal aim of this study was to investigate the extent to which the Covid19 pandemic has changed the education and career aspirations young people of South Africa. The specific objectives were:

1. To explore the education and career aspirations of young people in South Africa before Covid-19.
2. To understand the main factors underlying the pre-Covid-19 education and career aspirations
3. To explore the extent to which the Covid-19 has changed young people's education and career aspirations
4. To recommend ways in which future interventions can support youth aspirations in the post-Covid 19 era.

The developing and achieving aspirations Framework was used to conceptually guide this study. The framework's main thesis is that aspirations are shaped by structural factors, their lived experience with the family as well as the social context shaped by the community as well as by societal values. Methodologically, the study was solely qualitative in design and drew data from 20 young people from Soshanguve, a township north of Pretoria in the Tshwane Municipality. Data was collected from these young people using face to face in-depth interviews then analysed through thematic analysis. The overall key findings are summarised in the next section in line with the study's specific objectives.

5.2 Summary of Findings

5.2.1 Education and career aspirations of young people in South Africa before Covid-19.

The young people interviewed seemed to have had firm education and career aspirations before Covid-19. Data from the interviews suggest that these young people knew exactly what they wanted to do next, which for most was to pass their Grade 12 (Matric) and then further their studies in tertiary institutions to study courses they have always wanted for themselves. This finding reflected an implicit perception among young people that the attainment of post-secondary school education is, as previously argued, an important contributor to labour market success in South Africa (Altman, et al, 2014):

5.2.2 Main factors underlying the pre-Covid-19 education and career aspirations

While some of the respondents interviewed could not directly pinpoint their main influencers of their education and career aspirations, most respondents highlighted several factors underlying their aspirations. In terms of the developing and achieving aspirations' framework these were the direct and indirect influences of immediate and extended family members; community role models such as successful community members and teachers who also influenced young people directly and indirectly, as well as the values transmitted through social media by 'influencers and celebrities.

Impact of Covid-19 on young people's education and career aspirations

Transpiring from the data collected from the respondent's interviews, like most of the society, respondents acknowledged that the Covid-19 pandemic was largely negative and brought about several distractions among individuals and societies. Some of the respondents interviewed, for example, explained that they were unable to attain the education and career aspirations goals they set for themselves because of the impact brought by the Covid-19 and the sudden change in the way of living. Some revealed that their parents were retrenched from their workplaces, young people from disadvantaged homes couldn't fully access the new teaching resources introduced in response to the national lockdowns and this affected their studies, and some young people could not get workplace exposure because they could not complete their internship programmes. All this impacted how the respondents live, socialize, and view their future and, indeed, left many respondents skeptical about their future as they were faced with many uncertainties about their education and career aspirations due to the impact caused by Covid-19.

Further discussions with the respondents however suggested that most saw the pandemic as a major setback rather than the 'end of the road'. It was evident that respondents are, in general, still motivated to attain their education and career aspirations as most of them still want to go to tertiary institutions to further their studies as was the case before the pandemic. With that said, respondents still see education as the first solid step to achieving their career aspirations.

Plausible interventions to support youth aspirations

Asked what they thought the government and/or society could do to assist young people achieve their dreams in the post-Covid-19 era, the respondents interviewed invariably urged the government to provide them with financial and other practical assistance for further education as well as for the creation of job opportunities. Bursaries, scholarships, and skills centres as well as study facilities were given as examples of how this assistance could be provided. This clearly affirmed earlier findings that most respondents aspired to attain higher education and to acquire some skills.

5.3 Overall conclusion of the study

The overall conclusion of the study is that even though Covid-19 pandemic brought about uncertainties in young people's lives their pre-Covid-19 education and career aspirations remain. Most young people still want to pursue tertiary education and embark on various careers. Even those who aspire to be entrepreneurs aspire to first get academic knowledge from tertiary institutions to build solid foundation for their businesses. While it emerged that the family, community and social values greatly influences young people's education and career aspirations, there was a general consensus among young people that there is need for government financial and practical support to ensure that youth aspirations are attained in the post-pandemic period.

5.4 Recommendations

Based on the overall study findings the following recommendations for policy, practice and further research are made.

Recommendations for policy and practice

- The government should provide necessary skills, provide support and funds to improve young people's access to tertiary education including vocational education where they can learn various skills. While there are some government programmes in this regard, it is clear from the study that the overall perception among young people is that these are limited or not easily accessible.
- Skills centres should be established in resource-strained communities such as Soshanguve. This will not only enhance youth aspirations but will also equip the youth of South Africa with skills that are relevant for the current labour market. For example if they are skilled, they can also open their own businesses and not solely rely on the government to create jobs but through the youth being entrepreneurs they themselves can create jobs.
- There should be regular career exhibitions or workshops by government, the private sector and community-based organisations to expose young people to different fields and to equip them with any information they might need to decide on the careers they want to pursue.
- Platforms should be created to allow successful community members to regularly encourage or motivate young people through talks, or workshops which will empower young people.

Recommendations for further research

- Given the paucity of research on youth aspirations especially in communities of low socio-economic status, a much larger study ideally using a mixed method approach is recommended. Such a study can further explore areas not covered by this current study as

the plausibility of creating youth-led projects to help address youth unemployment; understanding resilience mechanisms young people used during the Covid-19 pandemic; and the extent to which policy makers take into consideration youth aspirations in the design of youth policies, especially youth employment policies and programmes.

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Appendix A: Information sheet and consent form

Appendix A: Information Sheet and Consent Form



UNIVERSITEIT VAN PRETORIA
UNIVERSITY OF PRETORIA
YUNIBESITHI YA PRETORIA

*Departement Sosiologie/Department of Sociology
Fakulteit Geesteswetenskappe/Faculty of Humanities*

Who I am and why I am here

Greetings. My name is Portia Mangwedi and I am a Masters student in the Department of Sociology at the University of Pretoria. As partial requirements of my studies, I am undertaking a study on the South African youth educational and career aspirations before and after Covid-19. The study aims to investigate the extent to which the Covid-19 pandemic changed the education and career aspirations of young people in South Africa.

Request for your participation

To assist me in gathering the information required to complete the project I am requesting your permission to conduct an interview with you that should last no longer than 2 hours. In addition, I will be grateful for your permission to audio-record the interview. On the next page there is a place for you to sign as an indication that you give permission for me to conduct the interview and, if you are willing, to audio-record it.

Please understand that you are not being forced to take part in this study and the choice whether to participate or not is yours alone. If you choose not take part, there will also be no penalties and you will NOT be **disadvantaged** in ANY way. If you agree to participate, you may choose to withdraw at any time during the interview. Furthermore, if at any point in the interview you feel uncomfortable with a question asked, you are not forced to answer it and you have the option to refuse to respond to the question.

Your participation will cost you nothing and there will be no direct benefits to you.

Confidentiality

All the information you provide in this interview will be kept highly confidential and in all dissemination of the study results pseudonyms will be used to protect your identity. The information will only be used for academic purposes such as writing the dissertation, presenting in local and international conferences, writing journal articles, books, or book chapters. However please note that the following:

- The records from your participation may be reviewed by people responsible for making sure that research is done properly.
- **As per the University of Pretoria data storage policy, the transcripts of your interview will be stored securely and, in a password-protected format in the Department of Sociology for a minimum of 15 years. During this time only I, the researcher, my supervisor and, other staff members of the Department of Sociology, may have access to the data.**
- **In future, the data from the study may also be used to write other research outputs such as conference papers and/or journal articles.**

Risks/Discomforts

There are no anticipated risks attached to participating in this study. However, if you feel distressed in any way at any point during the interview or after, please let me know and I will provide you with the details of trained counsellors such as those **at Lifeline Pretoria who will offer your services free of charge on the following numbers 012 804 1853.**

If you have any concerns regarding the way the interview was conducted, or any other concern regarding your participation in this study, please contact the Postgraduate Coordinator of the Department of Sociology at the University of Pretoria on 012 420 3744 or by email at Zitha.Mokomane@up.ac.za

Consent
I hereby consent to participate in the research on South African youth education and career aspirations before and after covid-19. I understand that I am participating freely and without being forced in any way to do so. I understand that I can stop this interview at any time should I not want to continue, and this decision will not affect me negatively.
I understand that this is an academic research project.
I understand that my answers will remain confidential.
.....
Signature of participant
.....
Date

I am willing for the interview to be audio taped
.....
Signature of participant
.....
Date

Interviewer’s signature:
Date:

Appendix B: Semi-structured interview guide

APPENDIX B: Interview guide for young men and young women

1. Background characteristics

- a. Age-----
- b. Gender -----
- c. What is your highest educational attainment?
- d. Do you have any other qualifications? What are they?
- e. What is the main reason for you to have chosen your field of study?
- f. Please tell me about your family background. Probe; Are there any members of your family that you specifically look up to in terms of education and/or career? Please elaborate
- g. Please tell me about the community you live in. Probe; Are there any community members that you specifically look up to in terms of education and/or career? Please elaborate
- h. Are you active on social media?
 - o If yes, what platforms do you usually use? How would you say social media impacts your world view?
 - o If not on social media, please explain why?

2. Educational and career aspirations before Covid-19

- a. Before 2020, what is the highest level of education that you had hope to attain? Please explain why.
- b. What future career were you most interested in pursuing for yourself? (What did you want to do when you grow up?). Please explain why.
- c. Who or what would you have had influenced your educational aspirations? Please explain how they did that. Probe: family, school or social media
- d. Who or what would you have had influenced your career aspirations? Please explain how they did that. Probe: family, school or social media
- e. Before the Covid-19 pandemic how confident were you that you will achieve your educational and career aspirations? Please explain why

3. Educational and career aspirations after Covid-19

- a. Please share with me the extent to which the Covid-19 pandemic has affected you personally.
- f. In what ways would you say the pandemic has affected your educational aspirations? Probe: Do you still want to pursue the same educational dreams? Why/Why not?
- g. In what ways would you say the pandemic has affected your career aspirations? Probe: Do you still want to pursue the same educational dreams? Why/Why not?
- h. Given the socioeconomic impact of the Covid-19 pandemic, how confident are you that you will still achieve your educational and career aspirations? Please explain why
- i. In what ways would you say the pandemic has affected career and educational aspirations of young people in South Africa? Please explain why you say so

- j. In what ways do you think government and/or society can assist young people achieve their dreams in the post-Covid 19 era?

Is there anything else you would like to add on this issue that we have not talked about?

Thank you for your time and participation in this study

Appendix C: Ethics Approval



Faculty of Humanities
Fakulteit Geesteswetenskappe
Lefapha la Bomotheo



16 September 2021

Dear Miss PA Mangwedi

Project Title:	South African youth education and career aspirations before and after covid-19
Researcher:	Miss PA Mangwedi
Supervisor(s):	Prof ZS Mokomane
Department:	Sociology
Reference number:	15227988 (HUM010/0721)
Degree:	Masters

I have pleasure in informing you that the above application was **approved** by the Research Ethics Committee on 16 September 2021. Data collection may therefore commence.

Please note that this approval is based on the assumption that the research will be carried out along the lines laid out in the proposal. Should the actual research depart significantly from the proposed research, it will be necessary to apply for a new research approval and ethical clearance.

We wish you success with the project.

Sincerely,

A handwritten signature in black ink, appearing to read 'Karen Harris'.

Prof Karen Harris
Chair: Research Ethics Committee
Faculty of Humanities
UNIVERSITY OF PRETORIA
e-mail: tracey.andrew@up.ac.za