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Students' Voices in Vocational Education: A Sociological Exploration

by

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LIST OF ABBREVIATIONS AND ACRONYMS

ANC	African National Congress
CDE	Centre for Development and Enterprise
COSATU	Congress of South African Trade Unions
COVID-19	CoronaVirus Disease 2019
DoE	Department of Education
FET	Further Education and Training
GET	General Education and Training
HEIs	Higher Education and Institutions
IPET	Implementation Plan for Education and Training
NC(V)	National Certificate Vocational
NQF	National Qualifications Framework
NATED	National Accredited Technical Education Diploma
NCHE	National Commission on Higher Education
OBE	Outcomes Based Education
SAQA	South African Qualifications Authority
TVET	Technical and Vocational Education and Training
VET	Vocational Education and Training

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DECLARATION

I Patience Motsatsi declare that this dissertation/ mini-dissertation research paper is my own work. Where secondary material has been used (either from a printed source or from the internet), it has been carefully acknowledged and referenced in accordance with the University of Pretoria's requirements.

I understand what plagiarism is and acknowledge the implication and university policy in this regard.

Patience Motsatsi

May 2023

ABSTRACT

This dissertation offers a comprehensive sociological investigation into students' perspectives in vocational education in Pretoria, South Africa. It seeks to elucidate the underlying reasons guiding students' preference for vocational education over traditional academic pathways, primarily focusing on social and educational policy and practice.

Adopting a qualitative research methodology, the study explores insights from semi-structured interviews conducted with fifteen students engaged in local technical colleges. It critically analyses how students' perceptions of vocational education impact their motivation, active engagement, and overall learning experience.

A detailed examination of the contributing factors that drive such educational choices is presented, emphasising the roles of familial influence, resource accessibility, and the overall quality of available academic programs. The study also probes into the intricate interactions between these elements and how they collectively inform students' decision-making processes.

In addition, this research underscores the potential long-term consequences associated with the choice of vocational education. This includes implications for economic prospects, job market accessibility, and opportunities for social mobility.

The study's findings highlight a significant correlation between students' sense of belonging and purpose in their education and the alignment of their vocational training with career aspirations. Furthermore, it underscores the importance of nurturing an educational environment conducive to dialogue and collaboration and one that promotes active learning and participation.

This work contributes substantially to the emerging body of knowledge on the role of student voices in vocational education and implies potential implications for policy makers, educators, and stakeholders within the educational sector. It is hoped that the insights gleaned from this research will help in formulating effective strategies and policies aimed at enhancing vocational education experiences.

Keywords: Vocational Education, Student Perceptions, Educational Choice, Policy and Practice, Social Mobility, Economic Prospects, Qualitative Research, South Africa.

CHAPTER 1: INTRODUCTION TO THE THESIS

1.1 Introduction

The importance of including students as active participants in their educational trajectory is shown by the current surge in recognition of students' voices as critical forces in forming educational systems (Cook-Sather, 2020). This discussion covers vocational education, a crucial component of the educational ecosystem known for its ability to provide real-world training and skills that improve employment and promote social mobility (Pambudi and Harjanto, 2020: 1). The research theme, "Students' Voices in Vocational Education: A Sociological Exploration," ventures into the experiential realities, viewpoints, and ambitions of students in vocational education environments. The intention is to recognise their essential contributions as significant participants in these activities' conception, implementation, and evaluation.

Accumulating literature over recent years has recognised the importance of students' voices in education, exploring the potential for their perspectives to refine and invigorate educational practices (Hall, 2017; Strydom and Loots, 2020; Bragg, 2020: 475). Within the sphere of vocational education, considering students' voices is especially vital, as these programmes aspire to furnish learners with industry-specific competencies and knowledge that directly affect their future professional trajectories and personal development (Biemans *et al.*, 2019: 2).

The number of students enrolling in Technical and Vocational Education and Training (TVET) colleges is steadily increasing. According to data, TVET enrollments significantly increased between 2010 and 2019 (Khuluvhe, 2021: 14; Department of Higher Education and Training, 2019: 6). This growing tendency reflects students' equal interest in academic and vocational education. The systems guiding these educational decisions, however, continue to be convoluted and unclear. According to this study, students are entering and navigating through TVET colleges that are framed by neo-liberal policies and practises.

The observed escalation in vocational education enrolment may be attributable to transformative labour market dynamics and modern market fluctuations. These adjustments demand a flexible and successful educational system (Gessler & Freund, 2019). The efficiency development of the

educational and Vocational Education and Training (VET) system may unintentionally suffer because of this strategy, which would undermine social fairness and democratic participation (McGrath *et al.*, 2020). Due to the development of these policies and vocational education systems, there is a risk that they may foster an environment that favours the privileged educational sector while hindering the ability of disadvantaged learners to make decisions about their educational and professional paths.

The sociological approach to schooling provides understanding of how systems and practises support inequality and uphold prevailing ideas (Bourdieu, 2020). To challenge existing power structures and promote an equitable vocational education, this project will concentrate on student voices, with a focus on individuals from disadvantaged and underrepresented groups (Freire, 2020). The importance of students as co-constructors of knowledge and engaged learners is highlighted by this change towards learner-centredness approaches (Cook-Sather, 2020: 448).

This exploration of students' voices in vocational education aspires to offer an in-depth comprehension of how these voices could further the ongoing refinement and transformation of vocational education systems. The study aims to examine student perceptions and their implications for decisions about careers by using a critical social policy framework. This study aims to increase the knowledge base of many stakeholders, including researchers, educators, policymakers, and students, as they navigate the complex and dynamic terrain of the 21st century by integrating empirical evidence with theoretical underpinnings from sociology and education.

1.2 Background

The introduction of the National Certificate (Vocational) (NC(V)) into South Africa's vocational training landscape represented an effort to address issues of poor-quality programmes, irrelevance to the economy, and inadequate technical and cognitive skills amongst TVET graduates (Van der Bijl & Lawrence, 2019). Despite its well-intentioned founding, the NC(V) was unable to achieve its stated goals, in part because of systemic difficulties that plagued its execution.

Needham (2019: 92) emphasises that the National Certificate Vocational NC(V), created by the Department of Education in 2007, was intended to serve as a substitute for a secondary school

diploma to contextualise the implementation of the NC(V). It does not, however, match with FET programmes and frequently forces students to choose their specialties at an early age. This difference in job possibilities for NC(V) students compared to their counterparts enrolled in National Qualification (NATED) courses or at universities raises crucial questions about the support systems inside TVET institutions. Additionally, the NC(V) program's requirement for premature specialisation could potentially prevent students from exploring alternate career choices, leading to a feeling of academic and professional inflexibility (Department of Education, 2006).

Students' perceptions of TVET colleges, generally negative in nature, have been extensively discussed in various studies (Matsolo *et al.*, 2016; Balwanz, 2015; Powell & McGrath, 2013). These views are created and shaped by a variety of elements, including how well students comprehend the programmes offered at TVET colleges, how these institutions are marketed and positioned, and how well-known and well-liked they are in general. The voices of the students themselves have frequently been ignored in the discussion around vocational education, despite the broad recognition of these perceptions. Furthermore, there has not been much criticism of South African social and educational policies that shape the framework of vocational education. The narratives around vocational education must be grounded in the lived experiences of students rather than fallacies and oversimplifications, according to Powell & McGrath (2013: 19).

Vocational education in South Africa, as framed by the South African White Paper on Education and Training (Republic of South Africa (RSA), 1995b), has been characterised by a separation of the supply of vocational education from traditional schools, largely dominated by private markets and providers. This strategy, heavily inspired by neoliberal narratives, is based on the flawed assumption that a supply-side skills development strategy with a restricted emphasis will effectively solve issues related to economic growth and social disparities. This strategy is criticised by Defaldo (2016), who claims that emphasising quick workplace preparation serves company interests more than the demands of the workers themselves.

Since the 1920s, social efficiency has served as the foundation for vocational education and training, emphasising the necessity to "fit the child for the job" (Defaldo, 2016: 56). This concept promotes acceptance of the social system rather than challenging it, placing more importance on the system's improvement than on an individual's growth. Due to its disregard for students' needs in service of elite interests, this educational paradigm may set them up for failure.

Given this context, the importance of illuminating student voices within vocational education becomes paramount. To change vocational education policies and practises so that they better meet the needs and interests of students within this system, it is essential to first understand their motivations, experiences, and goals. This study, which is informed by a critical social policy perspective, aims to address these problems by giving students' voices, which are frequently silenced in the conversation about vocational education, a platform.

1.3 Study Focus

1.3.1 Problem statement

Despite the growing awareness of students' voices as crucial components in influencing educational institutions (Cook-Sather & Agu, 2020), vocational education has remained a relatively under-explored subject (Winberg and Hollis-Turner, 2021: 8). Several variables contribute to this research difficulty. For starters, traditional methods to vocational education have tended to prioritise employers' and industries' interests over those of students' (Biemans *et al.*, 2019). This has resulted in a misalignment between vocational education curricula, pedagogical practises, and students' different needs, aspirations, and experiences (Cedefop, 2020). As a result, students may become disengaged, resulting in poor learning outcomes and restricted success in their future employment (Ryan & Deci, 2020).

Second, previous research on students' voices in vocational education has frequently concentrated on quantitative outcomes such as academic achievement, employment rates, and skill acquisition (Bragg, 2020: 476; Strydom and Loots, 2020). While these metrics are significant, they do not capture the whole spectrum of students' experiences and viewpoints, which can provide vital insights into the nuanced, subjective aspects of vocational education. By emphasising students'

perspectives, this study aims to fill a vacuum in the literature and contribute to a more comprehensive understanding of the complex interplay between vocational education and the different social, cultural, and economic settings in which it operates (Bourdieu, 2020).

Thirdly, the underrepresentation of marginalised and underprivileged groups in vocational education research has exacerbated the research problem. Existing studies risk sustaining and strengthening social inequities and power imbalances in vocational education settings by ignoring the voices of these students (Freire, 2020:15). The sociological investigation of students' voices in vocational education provides an opportunity to challenge these dominant institutions and achieve a more inclusive and equitable educational landscape (Baumber *et al.*, 2020).

In summary, this study addresses the research problem of inadequate assimilation of students' perspectives, experiences, and goals in vocational education research and practise. Given these challenges and gaps in the existing literature, this study seeks to answer the following research questions.

1.3.2 Research Questions

- Why do students choose vocational education over academic education?
- What are the factors that informed students' choice of vocational education?
- What is their overall experience/s at TVET institution?

1.4 Aims and objectives of this study

1.4.1 General Objective

- The aim of this study is to analyse how students make their choices of vocational education over academic education at secondary level.

1.4.2 Specific Objectives

- To explore student choice for vocational education compared to academic education and analyse students' career choices.
- To examine what influence students' decisions with regards to choosing vocational education at secondary level instead of academic education.

- To explore their experiences at TVET college

1.5 Rationale

The study on students' voices in vocational education is rooted in the imperative to gain a comprehensive understanding of students' perspectives, experiences, and goals. This knowledge forms the bedrock for advancing inclusivity and equity in education, shaping pedagogical practices, and influencing policy frameworks (Cook-Sather & Agu, 2020: 446).

The sociological lens applied in this study provides a crucial perspective for examining how vocational education systems intersect with broader social, cultural, and economic processes (Bourdieu, 2020).

In the South African context, the study is prompted by the need to address the gap between the optimistic expectations for social change and the actual challenges faced post-democratic transition. Education, while expected to drive transformation, has fallen short, especially concerning communities of colour. This study identifies youth as a pivotal and transformative demographic in a society seeking change, emphasizing the necessity of re-envisioning secondary education to address social justice and transformation.

Additionally, the study explores global trends influencing students' lives, particularly prevailing policy discourses that shape secondary school social constructs. It delves into the impacts of education and skill-building based on market demands, seeking to understand alternative perspectives on the purpose of vocational education.

While vocational education plays a significant role globally, research on students' experiences in this context is limited. This study aims to bridge that gap, providing insights into students' perspectives within the social context of their educational and professional decisions. The findings can contribute to policy and practice improvements by shedding light on the needs and challenges faced by students in vocational education.

The significance of this work lies in its potential to advance theory, practice, and policy in vocational education. By focusing on the understudied setting of vocational education, the study adds nuance to our understanding of how students' voices can inform and strengthen research and practice. It also holds the promise of influencing the development of more learner-centred pedagogical practices and contributing to educational fairness and social justice. Furthermore, the research can inform national and international development efforts by providing insightful data for responsive policy frameworks and institutional structures in vocational education.

1.6 Neo-liberal characteristics in vocational education (TVET colleges)

As was already said, neo-liberal concepts that are controlled by private markets and providers still serve as the foundation for vocational education. This section explores the traits that demonstrate vocational education is neo-liberalistic, including decentralisation, privatisation of policies, teaching, and finance for this study.

1.6.1 Decentralisation

Decentralisation is the first neoliberal differentiating feature of TVET education. Decentralisation is a multifaceted notion that may be defined as the transfer of responsibility and power from the central government to lower levels of government such as local governments and other regulatory agencies (Barac and Marx, 2012: 31). It encompasses political, economic, fiscal, and administrative decentralisation, each with its own distinct qualities and repercussions. Gregersen *et al.* detailed the various types of decentralisations in Yuliani (2004):

1. *Political decentralisation*: which refers to the groups at different levels of government such as the central, meso and local groups empowered to make decisions related to what affects them.
2. *Market decentralisation*: Where government privatises or deregulates private functions (Yuliani 2004: 12)
3. *Fiscal decentralisation*: which refers to the process of dispersing the powers of taxation and revenue generation, which were previously concentrated, to other levels of government. For instance, local governments are given the power to raise and hold onto financial resources to carry out their duties, and finally.

4. *Administrative decentralisation*: which refers to the transfer of decision-making processes and authority to lower levels within an organisation. It is especially pertinent in the context of this investigation. Different levels of government, typically defined by a constitution, administer resources and address topics that have been delegated to them. Consequently, the delegation, deconcentration, and devolution provisions are the types of decentralisation that should be distinguished when discussing decentralisation as a process of change and in accordance with the degree of responsibility transfer. Public services, such as the education industry, are less directly impacted by the central government due to the decentralization of service delivery (Heystek, 2011: 45).

1.6.1.1 Decentralisation in Education sector

The South African Schools Act (SASA) of 1996 attempted to decentralise South Africa's education system, shifting control from the central government to local stakeholders such as School Governing Bodies (SGBs). This transformation was part of a new liberal hegemony that was adopted globally, with the goal of increasing access to educational resources and improving educational outcomes (Serfontein and De Waal, 2018). Decentralisation of the education system is believed to give schools and communities more local control and autonomy, allowing for greater flexibility in decision-making and customised solutions to local challenges (Bourdieu, 2020). Finally, educational decentralisation can improve educational quality and increase access to educational opportunities for marginalised groups.

Decentralisation in the education sector can be viewed as a key feature of neoliberalism. It is a component of neoliberalism that tries to increase the autonomy of educational institutions, decentralise power, and involve parents, school employees, and community members in decision-making (Sayed, 1997: 26). Furthermore, decentralisation aims to promote competition, choice, and diversity within the educational system. This transfer of power from the state to educational institution local authorities has been viewed as a means of empowering local stakeholders (Naidoo and Reddy, 2012). This move has been a crucial component of neoliberalism's efforts to encourage competition, choice, and diversity in the educational system.

1.6.1.2 Decentralisation at TVET Colleges

The Continuing Education and Training (CET) Act specified how technical and vocational education and training (TVET) colleges should be governed and operated. Section 10 of the CET Act mandates that the council of a public college perform all tasks required to run the public college, including drafting a college legislation. According to Section 13 of the CET Act (Act 16 of 2006), the principal has authority over the management and operation of a public college.

Based on the accomplishments in decision-making and the modest improvement seen following the establishment of School Governing Bodies, the general education sector in South Africa is assessed. Reforms made to TVET colleges in post-apartheid South Africa allowed stakeholder councils to formulate strategy and policy as well as mission statements stipulated in the CET Act (Wedekind, 2010: 302). This changed how colleges are managed from being solely under the control of government agencies. The Auditor General of South Africa (AGSA) concluded in 2017 that this led to some components of deficient administration, governance, and oversight in some colleges throughout their structural and governance reform (see DHET, 2018: 43).

According to Barac and Marx (2012: 318), education institutions now have extra responsibilities that necessitate stronger governance frameworks and efficient administration. Similar concerns were raised by principals in Wedekind's (2010) interviews, including the council members' interference with the colleges' daily business as a breach of corporate governance and the appointment of some councillors to the college councils based more on their ties to political parties than their qualifications for the position (p. 310). In this instance, students are primarily impacted by the subpar service provided by inexperienced council members who make choices about education without having sufficient relevant experience.

The establishment of the Sector Education and Training Authority (SETA) system in South Africa is an illustration of privatisation in the TVET industry (W&RSETA, 2020). By decentralising the provision of TVET services, this approach paves the way for more participation by private providers in the delivery of education and credentials. The number of private TVET colleges in the nation has increased as a result, along with the number of credentials and training programs provided by private providers.

The decentralisation process has an impact on the education sector in terms of establishing the educational system, equity, and quality. The poverty rate in South African schools, however, was

found to be unaffected by it (Naidoo, 2005). Decentralisation has brought neo-liberalism into the total management of the educational system by transferring from the central government to school governing body's total control of the personnel and financial resources (Motala and Pampallis, 2005).

1.6.2 Privatisation

Privatisation in the education sector, particularly in Technical and Vocational Education and Training (TVET), is a major component of neoliberal policies. Privatisation, defined as a growing engagement of private organisations in activities previously administered by the state, denotes a clear trend towards free-market principles in education (Verger, Fontdevila, & Zancajo, 2016: 7).

TVET strategy in South Africa has not fully achieved its desired aims of lowering unemployment and boosting the state's economic ambitions despite its implementation since 1994 (Needham, 2019: 96). A significant aspect of this approach is the establishment of a viable market for private educational consultants and firms. Their involvement includes a wide range of operations, such as educational service providing and management of catering and maintenance services in educational institutions.

Privatisation in South Africa's TVET industry has been aided by efforts like as the National Certificate Vocational NC(V) programme, which was started in 2008. The programme enabled commercial providers to supply NC(V) qualifications while simultaneously providing them with government financing. As a result, the number of private TVET colleges in South Africa has increased, enhancing the availability of vocational qualifications and training.

TVET education is being privatised in areas other than traditional education, such as skills development and training. In South Africa, for example, the Department of Higher Education and Training has pioneered steps to boost private providers' participation in skill development and training. This strategy has resulted in the establishment of a plethora of private providers offering a wide range of services, such as short courses, apprenticeships, and credentials (Anderson, 2020).

Privatisation in the educational sector has both external and internal consequences. It has an impact on the entire educational system, educator training programmes, and services provided to parents and communities. Apostolopoulou *et al.*, (2021:15) emphasise the significant importance of

government policy in this setting since private persons and organisations engage in educational activities at an increasing rate. This movement, typical of modernisation and economic neoliberal reforms, can also have negative implications, potentially harming parents', communities', and learners' educational rights (Pampallis, 2002: 25).

1.6.3 Students treated as liabilities by government

1.6.3.1 Privatising policies

The adoption of privatising policies, such as the World Culture Theory and the Globally Structured Education Agenda (GSEA), has brought about significant changes in the education sector. However, the negative impact of privatisation and capitalism on education in South Africa is evident. The political agendas of business organizations have led to education services prioritising economic control and social domination (Needham, 2019: 97).

The introduction of an education market driven by the private sector has transformed education services into business units focused on generating income while providing services. This approach may create an impression of improved service quality for students and parents. However, it fails to consider the overall needs of the population, resulting in underperformance among children because of privatization (Dervin and Zajda, 2015: 18). Proposed solutions to address this issue include enhancing access to public education and expanding technical and vocational training options for students, all while safeguarding the rights of parents and communities.

Privatisation has not only impacted local government services and the regional evaluation of education needs within communities, but it has also entrenched a new liberal approach to education policy. The concept of private sector education is unequivocally aligned with a neoliberal ideology, as it caters primarily to those who can afford such services (Arnove, 2019).

As a policy tool, privatisation has led the government to neglect the needs of students, compromising the quality, efficiency, and effectiveness of education provision for those who face daily barriers due to financial constraints, limited choices, and inadequate resources. The South African government finds itself increasingly unable to provide legitimate assistance to families and children who lack access to education due to the implementation of privatisation, as highlighted by Apostolopoulou *et al.* (2021).

1.6.3.2 Less funding

The lack of funding in schools is another neo-liberal characteristic visible in vocational education and has a negative impact on the academic potential of students due to a decrease in available academic opportunities. This has led to decentralisation and privatisation of educational services, in which the government has limited say in the authorisation of student support, scholarships, and access to academic tools and resources, which is largely determined by the power of local authorities. As a result, the career of educators has been given greater importance, indicated by training sessions and increased pay and status. Meanwhile, the reduced funding has caused a shutdown of public services and impacted the social growth and development of the community, as schools are more likely to provide educational services to students from financially advantaged families (Motala and Pampallis, 2005). With the decentralisation and privatisation in place, government has limited say in the authorisation of number of students being supported, given scholarship, their access and availability to academic tools and resources due to the power of the local authorities thus, negatively impacts the students and their access to education (Dervin and Zajda, 2015).

It is crucial to acknowledge that the effects of privatisation on Technical and Vocational Education and Training (TVET) can yield both positive and negative consequences. On one hand, private entities in the education sector can bring about more effective and targeted approaches to foster educational growth, alongside creating employment opportunities. However, on the other hand, the emphasis on economic control and social domination may result in diminished access to public education and a lack of resources necessary to support student success.

1.7 Organisation of the dissertation

Chapter 1: Introduction

This chapter one has introduced the study by highlighting the problem statement, objectives of the study and rationale. This chapter included the research background, problem statement, rationale, and significance of the study. Additionally, it presented the research questions and objectives that guided the investigation. This introductory chapter aims to contextualise the research within the

broader landscape of vocational education and establish the foundation for the subsequent chapters.

Chapter 2: Literature Review

In the second chapter, a comprehensive review of the existing literature on students' voices in education, with a particular focus on vocational education, will be conducted. This chapter will examine key theoretical frameworks, empirical findings, and debates in the field, highlighting the gaps and limitations in the current understanding of students' voices in vocational education. The literature review will provide a solid foundation for the development of the study's conceptual framework and research design, as well as inform the interpretation and discussion of the research findings.

Chapter 3: Critical Social Policy Framework: Theory and Methodology

The chapter three will discuss the theoretical framework and the research design and methodologies used to collect and analyse data. The third chapter will detail the methodological approach adopted in the study, including the research design, data collection methods, sampling strategy, and data analysis procedures. This chapter will provide a thorough and transparent account of the methodological choices made in the study, as well as their underlying rationale and implications. Additionally, the chapter will address ethical considerations and the steps taken to ensure the trustworthiness and validity of the research findings.

Chapter 4: Students' Choice for Vocational over Academic Education in Context

Chapter four is a discussion of why students chose vocational education over academic education and how the lens of social/educational policies and practice opened avenues for students' decision-making. The findings are divided into themes and will be analysed related to the existing literature to identify areas of correspondence and differences. The fourth chapter will present the results and findings of the study, organised according to the research questions and objectives. This chapter will provide a detailed account of the data gathered from the students' voices, experiences, and perspectives in vocational education settings. The findings will be presented using appropriate data visualisation techniques, such as tables, charts, and figures, to facilitate a clear and accessible

understanding of the results. Additionally, this chapter will include a discussion of any unexpected or emergent findings that arose during the data analysis process.

Chapter 5: Conclusion & Recommendations

Chapter five will make concluding remarks on the study. It argues that the social policy is biased towards political symbolism and neo-liberalism is coming to its expiration date. Furthermore, integrates with the major findings from chapter four and five along with its implications of the study. This will include the recommendations of possible solution for intervention, and further research. This chapter will highlight the study's contributions to the understanding of students' voices in vocational education, as well as its practical and policy implications. Furthermore, the chapter will address the limitations of the study and offer suggestions for future research in the field. Finally, the conclusion will provide a synthesis of the study's key findings, insights, and contributions, emphasising their relevance and significance for the ongoing transformation and improvement of vocational education systems in the 21st century.

CHAPTER 2: LITERATURE REVIEW

2.1 Introduction

In discerning the scope and direction of vocational education, the academic discourse has been greatly informed by a wealth of debates and studies initiated by government bodies, labour unions, and leading manufacturers. These sources converge on four central concerns within the domain of education: (1) the competence of traditional schools in preparing a future workforce equipped for national industrial growth, (2) the evolving landscape of work, (3) the origins of funding, and (4) the question of integrating versus separating vocational education facilities (Wollschlager and Guggenheim, 2004; Defalco, 2016; McGrath *et al.*, 2020).

A prevalent assertion within the scholarly community posits vocational practice and policy as indispensable to maintaining competitiveness within an increasingly globalised economy, as well as preparing the youth for an array of new jobs spurred by emerging technologies (Brush, 2016; McGrath *et al.*, 2020; Thompson, 2015). In the context of socio-economic disparities, Oketch (2007) maintains that vocational education and training should materially improve the prospects of economically and academically disadvantaged youth in securing stable wage employment or self-employment. Field, Musset and Alvarez-Galvan (2014) extend this argument by emphasising the role of vocational education in equipping the labour force with a diverse range of skills beyond those associated with university education.

The shift within vocational education and training (VET) towards neoliberal ideologies is characterised by the adoption of the 'Old Commonwealth' toolkit, which entails the reorganisation of public management structures, thereby granting businesses and organisations greater influence at the national and local levels (McGrath and Lugg, 2012; McGrath, 2020). However, this approach has not been without its critics, such as Foster (1965), who contends that post-independence labour markets require general, rather than vocational, education.

Indeed, a salient concern within this domain pertains to the demographics of students who opt for or are assigned to vocational education. Many of these individuals originate from marginalised, low-income backgrounds (Lange *et al.*, 2020: 19), casting vocational education programs as a type of 'education for the masses' aimed at integrating increasing numbers of immigrants (Odgen,

1990). However, this approach has been criticised for depriving students of their right to choose particularly high-performing students who aspire to attend universities or colleges. This narrative underscores the importance of investigating the realities and implications of vocational education beyond the interests of businesses and institutions, thereby ensuring that the needs of students are duly considered.

2.2 Theoretical Foundations of Students' Voices in Education

The theoretical foundations of students' voices in education can be traced back to the works of influential educational philosophers and theorists, such as Paulo Freire, John Dewey, and Jean Piaget. Their ideas have shaped the understanding and practice of education, emphasizing the importance of learner-centered approaches, democratic pedagogy, and student agency. These concepts are particularly relevant to vocational education research and practice, as they highlight the crucial role of students' voices in fostering meaningful and effective learning experiences.

Paulo Freire's (1970) ground-breaking work, "Pedagogy of the Oppressed," introduced the concept of critical pedagogy. This approach emphasises dialogue, reflection, and critical thinking as essential elements of education. In the context of vocational education, Freire's philosophy underscores the importance of engaging students as active participants. By questioning and challenging dominant structures, students can contribute to transformative and emancipatory learning experiences. Recognizing the potential of marginalised learners, incorporating their voices in curriculum design, and instructional strategies becomes crucial (Giroux, 2010).

John Dewey (1938) advocated for progressive education, emphasizing students as active learners who construct knowledge through meaningful experiences. Dewey's democratic education philosophy encourages student participation in decision-making processes and contributing to the collective good. In vocational education, Dewey's ideas highlight the need for responsive learning environments. These environments consider students' interests, needs, and aspirations, promoting a sense of ownership and responsibility among learners (Schön, 1987).

Jean Piaget (1952) is renowned for his work on cognitive development, which has informed the field of education and the understanding of students' voices. Piaget's theory of cognitive development posits that learning is an active process in which students construct knowledge through their interactions with the environment and their experiences (Piaget, 1952). This

perspective, known as constructivism, emphasises the importance of learner-centered education, which seeks to facilitate students' cognitive development by providing them with opportunities to engage in meaningful and challenging learning experiences (Fosnot, 1996). In vocational education, Piaget's constructivist approach underlines the need to consider students' voices in the design and implementation of learning activities, recognizing their role in shaping the learning process and outcomes (Savery & Duffy, 1996).

The theoretical foundations presented by Freire, Dewey, and Piaget underscore learner-centered approaches, democratic pedagogy, and student agency. These concepts are highly relevant to vocational education, emphasizing the integration of students' voices in the design, implementation, and evaluation of educational programs. By acknowledging students as active contributors, vocational education can create empowering and meaningful learning experiences, aligning with the transformative goals outlined by these influential theorists. Further research in vocational education could delve into practical applications and adaptations of these theories in diverse vocational contexts.

2.2.1 Sociological Perspectives on Students' Voices in Vocational Education

This section delves into key sociological concepts and frameworks that are relevant to understanding students' voices in vocational education. Specifically, we explore Pierre Bourdieu's notions of habitus, capital, and field, and Erving Goffman's theories of interaction rituals and the presentation of self. By examining these perspectives, we can gain insights into how they inform and enhance our understanding of students' voices in vocational education, especially about power, identity, and social inequality.

2.2.1.1 Pierre Bourdieu's Concepts: Habitus, Capital, and Field

Pierre Bourdieu's theoretical framework is influential in understanding the dynamics of social structures and individual agency in vocational education (Bourdieu, 1986). His concepts of habitus, capital, and field can be applied to analyse the roles and experiences of students in vocational education.

Habitus refers to the system of durable dispositions that individuals acquire through their socialisation (Bourdieu, 1990). In the context of vocational education, habitus can be understood as the social, cultural, and educational background of students that shape their attitudes,

perceptions, and aspirations (Robson, 2015). This can influence students' choices of vocational courses and their engagement with the educational process.

Capital, according to Bourdieu (1986), includes economic, cultural, social, and symbolic forms of capital that individuals accumulate and use to maintain or improve their position in the social field. In vocational education, students may gain various forms of capital, such as technical skills, professional networks, and certifications, which can enhance their employability and social status (Bathmaker, 2013).

Field, as defined by Bourdieu (1993), refers to the social space where actors and their capitals are situated and struggle to maintain or enhance their positions. Vocational education can be seen as a field where students, teachers, and other stakeholders interact, and where students' voices emerge, are negotiated, and contested (Colley, James, & Diment, 2007).

2.2.1.2 Erving Goffman's Theories: Interaction Rituals and the Presentation of Self

Erving Goffman's theories of interaction rituals and the presentation of self offer valuable insights into the social processes that shape students' voices in vocational education (Goffman, 1959, 1967). Goffman's perspective emphasises the importance of everyday interactions and performances in constructing and maintaining social identities.

Interaction rituals refer to the rules and norms governing social interactions (Goffman, 1967). In the context of vocational education, these rituals can include classroom interactions, group work, and communication with teachers and peers. The way students participate in these rituals can influence their social identities and relationships within the vocational education setting (MacLure & Walker, 2000).

The presentation of self, as described by Goffman (1959), involves individuals' performances in social situations to create and maintain impressions of themselves. In vocational education, students may present themselves in various ways, such as being competent, motivated, or professional, to gain social approval and enhance their positions in the educational setting (Evans, 2015).

Sociological perspectives, specifically those of Bourdieu and Goffman, provide valuable frameworks for understanding the complexities of students' voices in vocational education. By

examining the roles of habitus, capital, and field, as well as interaction rituals and the presentation of self, we can better comprehend the power dynamics, identity construction, and social inequalities that shape students' experiences and expressions in vocational education settings.

2.3 Motivations Behind Choosing Vocational Education Over Academic Pathways

2.3.1 Vocational Education and Training institutions are not equal to academic education.

Vocational education and training (VET) has seen an increase in popularity as a form of post-secondary training in recent years. According to Mason (2020), VET refers to career and technical education that prepares learners for specific jobs, while also providing additional educational opportunities through manual and practical activities. This type of education is advantageous for learners due to its ability to provide marketable skills in short periods of time and in a financially feasible manner. Furthermore, these programs have proved useful in terms of improving expertise and professional networks for future engagement in the workforce. As a result, many learners choose vocational education paths over more traditional academic education. Therefore, there is evidence that suggest those who pursue VET may have better opportunities for employment compared to those taking an academic pathway.

There is evidence to suggest that the private and public Technical and Vocational Education and Training (TVET) colleges in South Africa have different qualities and costs associated with them. Public TVET colleges are known for providing quality educational programmes and resources that equip learners with the practical and theoretical skills needed to succeed in the labour market (Remington, 2018: 4). These programmes are partly subsidised by the government, making them more affordable to learners. Private TVET colleges, meanwhile, charge fees in exchange for courses meant to generate a profit (Muñoz and Vigil, 2018: 2). It is important for learners to consider the legal requirements of private institutions to ensure that they are receiving quality education in a cost-effective manner. Private colleges may be more expensive, and thus it is advisable that learners ensure that they are making an informed decision before investing in one. It is likely that an investment in a private college may offer a lower return in terms of quality and opportunities than that of a public college (Remington, 2018; 4). Consequently, it is crucial for

learners to differentiate between private and public TVET colleges and access the educational programmes that are of the highest quality and will best prepare them for long-term success in their professional future.

2.3.2 How public and private colleges affect students' decisions for vocational education over academic education, especially NC(V).

The private and public vocational education courses affect the decision of students for vocational education over academic education. In addition, vocational education disregards philosophies and theories based on the coursework and provides the desired qualifications that take a shorter amount of time. This helps students to get less time and complete their programs. However, academic education takes a specific time to get the qualifications, and this makes a career goal reach upwards. When it comes to costs, vocational courses have short durations which makes them more cost-effective than traditional and academic education. It focuses on a limited budget whereas the universities are focused on a huge budget for specific courses if it is privatised (Apriana *et al.* 2019: 1320). Hence, it is observed that these factors make students take decisions and focus on vocational education than academic education. This makes students go for vocational education which develops their opportunity and preference of the recruiter to provide employment. Hence, it is identified that the growing competition in the market makes students decide to get vocational education and improve their professional life.

According to (Makgato, 2019) students from lower-income families are more likely to opt for vocational education than those from upper-middle class families. The most likely explanation for this is the lack of financial resources for a college degree (Tien *et al.*, 2019). Lower-income families often rely on government assistance or lack sufficient funds to pay for a college education, so vocational education may be seen as a more viable option. In addition, lower-income students may value the immediate return on investment of vocational training. They may also find greater career satisfaction in following a hands-on educational path that leads to specific job prospects. On the other hand, those from upper-middle class families may feel obligated to pursue higher education as a means of keeping up with their peers or reaching for greater financial and social success.

According to DHET (2007: 6), public colleges with national certification programs NC(V)s tend to provide students with more industry standard qualifications. NC(V) courses are often more applicable in the job market, as students who have received NC(V)- certified training, may have an advantage over those who have only studied in academic programs. Overall, public colleges tend to offer a more comprehensive selection of vocational education and training programs than private colleges. Their lower cost of tuition, more accessible locations, and NC(V)-certified courses can be a great benefit to students who are looking to pursue vocational education.

2.4 Influential Factors Shaping Students' Preference for Vocational Education

2.4.1 Basis/Factors influencing students' choice for vocational education at the secondary level instead of academic education.

As already stated, students make decisions for vocational education including those at the secondary level instead of academic education (Khuluvhe, 2021: 14). Secondary school graduates face a dilemma in post-secondary education which takes a significant amount of time and want to enroll in the educational institution that makes them go for vocational education. This a short summary outlined of the factors (already mentioned in context discussed) that influence student choices, and which includes:

Program-focused approach: Vocational course is based on the program-focused approach that focuses on the specific job role according to the preference of the students. Students can choose their preferred education which is needed in the employment process. They can get technical knowledge from the vocational programs that focus on the applicable skills, it also makes students get a broader range of information with different levels of relevancy with the taken course (Said, 2018: 44).

Takes less time: Vocational programs focus on skills that take less time than academic education. In addition, it makes students achieve their desired goals in less time and makes students get specific skills that are needed for their employment (Mahmut, 2020: 3).

Cost-effective: As the vocational course has less time and takes shorter durations, it is more cost-effective for students than traditional or academic educational programs. TVET programs in public

and private education in South Africa make students get proper employment skills which provide effective job opportunities that students can access (Kintu *et al.*, 2019: 2).

Influence from families: The student has faced pressure from families in which they had to choose vocational education so that they can get jobs and help their families in South Africa. Families make the student choose vocational education as it is cost-effective after their secondary education (Khuluvhe, 2021).

Academic performance: Sometimes academic performance of students in secondary education does not provide the efficiency to get employment which makes them go for TVET which helps them to get jobs earlier than doing academic education (Mahmut, 2020).

Provide practical knowledge: Practical knowledge is necessary for an educational system that provides progress in experimental learning as well as helps in self-learning. Currently, organizations prefer to have employees who have practical knowledge that make them prompt perfection (Department of Labour (DoL), 2005).

2.5 Overall experience/s of students at TVET institutions

2.5.1 Students' Voices in General Education

Students' voices in general education have gained increasing attention in recent years, as researchers, educators, and policymakers recognise the importance of engaging learners as active participants in the educational process (Cook-Sather *et al.*, 2018). This section will provide an overview of the research on students' voices in general education, highlighting the key findings, debates, and limitations in the field, and discussing the various methods and approaches employed to engage students' voices.

Participatory Action Research (PAR) is a research approach that seeks to involve participants in the investigation and transformation of their own realities, emphasizing collaboration, reflexivity, and empowerment (Kemmis *et al.*, 2014). In the context of education, PAR has been used as a means of engaging students' voices, enabling them to contribute to the identification, analysis, and resolution of issues affecting their learning experiences (Bergold & Thomas, 2012). By fostering a sense of ownership and agency among learners, PAR can promote meaningful and lasting changes in educational practices and policies (Noffke & Somekh, 2009: 499). The principles and

methods of PAR may be applicable to vocational education settings, as they encourage the integration of students' perspectives and experiences in the design and implementation of curricula and instructional strategies (Lewin and Stuart, 2016).

Student Voice Initiatives (SVI) are programmes and activities designed to promote students' active participation in decision-making processes within educational institutions (Fielding, 2004). These initiatives may take various forms, such as student councils, peer mentoring programmes, and student-led conferences, and aim to foster a culture of democratic engagement and accountability among learners (Lundy, 2007). Research on SVIs has demonstrated their potential to enhance students' sense of belonging, motivation, and academic achievement, as well as contribute to the development of more responsive and inclusive educational practices (Mitra, 2008). In the context of vocational education, SVIs may serve as a valuable tool for engaging students' voices, particularly in relation to issues such as curriculum development, assessment, and career guidance (Mager & Nowak, 2012).

Student-Teacher Partnerships (STP) are collaborative relationships between students and educators, which seek to promote shared responsibility and mutual learning in the educational process (Cook-Sather *et al.*, 2014: 6). These partnerships can take various forms, ranging from informal classroom interactions to more structured programs and initiatives, and often involve activities such as co-teaching, co-planning, and co-assessment (Bovill *et al.*, 2016). Research on STPs has shown that they can contribute to the development of more effective and learner-centered educational practices, as well as enhance students' sense of agency, self-efficacy, and engagement in learning (Healey, Flint and Harrington, 2014). In vocational education, STPs may offer a promising avenue for incorporating students' voices, particularly in relation to the development of pedagogical strategies and learning environments that are responsive to the diverse needs and aspirations of learners (Conner, Posner and Nsowaa, 2022).

The research on students' voices in general education highlights the importance of engaging learners as active participants in the educational process, using methods and approaches such as Participatory Action Research, Student Voice Initiatives, and Student-Teacher Partnerships. These approaches may be applicable and adaptable to the context of vocational education, as they offer

valuable insights and tools for incorporating students' perspectives and experiences in the design, implementation, and evaluation of educational programs and initiatives.

2.5.2 The Perception and Stigmatisation of TVET Colleges

2.5.2.1 The Perceived Inferiority of TVET Colleges

Technical and Vocational Education and Training (TVET) colleges play a pivotal role in equipping students with critical skills for their future employment, offering both formal and informal training methods. These institutions strive to produce competent apprentices capable of seamless transitions into their professional lives (Badenhorst and Radile, 2018). Despite their commendable approach to developing practical skills, TVET colleges grapple with a myriad of stigmas, especially within the South African context.

This stigmatisation of knowledge production within TVET colleges, in many respects, is reflective of the sentiments expressed by South African college students themselves. Various prejudices surround the pedagogical and technical aspects of TVET colleges, often exacerbated by logistical challenges faced by the students (Terblanche, 2017).

A prominent issue is the discriminatory classification of students, which further perpetuates the existing stigmas. International practice trends within TVET colleges, ostensibly designed to facilitate economic development and mitigate social unemployment, are not immune from this problem (Makgato, 2019). The narrative of TVET colleges being an inferior educational route is often reinforced by this discriminatory approach, detracting from their primary purpose of equipping students with essential vocational skills.

South African TVET colleges are guided by policies aligning with government publications, informed by numerous studies employing empirical, deductive methodologies, including interviews and surveys. However, the echo of the country's historical legacy of apartheid education still resonates in these institutions, leading to unequal funding and access to resources (Buthelezi 2018).

The operational framework of TVET colleges, which includes their management infrastructure, program offerings, and student profiles, has been largely influenced by the historical legacy of apartheid. The colleges' performance partially depends on the predictability of funding and the

quality of leadership. Yet, despite these challenges, TVET colleges continue to strive towards the development of nationally recognised vocational programs in partnership with various stakeholders.

Despite the perceived stigma, TVET colleges have a critical role to play in practical knowledge dissemination, especially for middle-class students. Often, academic education's focus on concepts and theories can be at the expense of imparting applicable skills (Puustinen *et al.*, 2018; 175). TVET colleges can provide an accelerated pathway to success, with lower educational costs, for students who can benefit more from vocational rather than academic education. The perception of TVET colleges as second-tier institutions undermines the potential and value they can bring in equipping students with practical knowledge and skills vital for today's job market. This perception, often tied to the institutions' public image, necessitates active redress to better highlight the equal—if not, at times, superior—merits of vocational education.

2.5.2.2 Graduates from TVET colleges are not employable.

According to recent research, Technical and Vocational Education and Training (TVET) colleges may face challenges in terms of limited employment prospects. Mirabel *et al.*, (2022) conducted a study and found that the TVET sector is often perceived as offering "non-employability" and is therefore not preferred by many industries. Their findings indicate a low likelihood of securing employment through TVET programs (p. 140).

However, Tien *et al.*, (2019) argue that despite these concerns, TVET still provides knowledge of various industries, which can be advantageous when entering the job market (p. 120). They suggest that vocational education and training courses, which are often developed in alignment with neoliberal policies, enable learners to quickly acquire qualifications and develop attitudinal, behavioral, and technical competencies, thereby enhancing their employability potential. Moreover, these courses often serve as bridges between post-secondary and secondary vocational training, offering pathways to more advanced or technology-related careers. Collaborations between the public and private sectors can also lead to the development of relevant courses within TVET colleges.

The Centre for Development and Enterprise (CDE) (2012) highlighted how vocational education is understood and treated. Firstly, there is insufficient differentiation in subject choice. Subject packages that make up certain vocational disciplines, such as technological, hospitality and tourism, information technology, and agriculture, are not available to students. This is largely due to the lack of guidelines on how schools should plan their curriculum. Furthermore, there are no technically oriented mathematics or physical science classes that cater to the needs of students who pursue vocationally oriented disciplines.

Secondly, while the new curriculum allows for some differentiation, there is a notable lack of supporting policies to make such differentiation relevant. Thirdly, separating the Department of Higher Education and Training (which now houses the FET institutions) from the Department of Basic Education runs the risk of creating a watertight barrier between vocational education provided by FET colleges and school-based education. This could jeopardise the educational continuum that runs from general education to vocational education and back to general education. It is evident that a considerable section of the instruction provided by General Further Education and Training (FET) Colleges has a strong vocation-oriented focus, rather than purely vocational instruction (CDE, 2012).

2.5.3. Private vs public schools

2.5.3.1 South African education policies and 'Political Symbolism'

The construction of policy throughout South Africa's history can be understood through what Jansen (2002) terms 'political symbolism'. This concept encapsulates the narrative of policymaking as a marker of transition from apartheid to post-apartheid society. The state's inclination to address policy conflicts primarily in the political realm, rather than the sphere of practical implementation, is reflected in the numerous instances of education policymaking (Jansen, 2002, p. 2).

The evolution of policy development in South Africa is rooted in the symbolic journey of moving beyond apartheid, however, this was done with no substantive plan of action. Literature describes the first period from 1994 to 1999 as 'symbolic' because it primarily served to showcase the new government's ideological credentials and rapid departure from the apartheid education system (Jansen, 2002; Mathole, 1998: 66; Rensburg, 1998 :50).

This symbolic nature is evident in the lack of connectivity between education policy and the lived experiences of students and teachers in classrooms. Policymakers, such as Dr. Ihron Rensburg, articulated profound acknowledgments of this. At the National Policy Review Conference of the African National Congress (ANC) in October 1998, Rensburg conceded that the period from 1994 to 1999 was an explicitly ideological political period marked by the transition from apartheid ideology to democratic order (Jansen, 2002; Rensburg 1998:50). However, the subsequent period from 1999 to 2004, designated for 'consolidation and deep transformation', did not receive the consideration it warranted (Jansen, 2002: 2). This suggests that most of the policymaking, heavily influenced by political symbolism, was founded upon assumptions that often bypassed the substantial efforts needed for quality education policy development and its practical implementation in South Africa.

Regrettably, many policies adopted a neoliberal trajectory, with elites making educational decisions and favoring the privatisation of policies. This route may have overshadowed opportunities for greater inclusivity and independence in policymaking. The subsequent discussion will uncover these threads of political symbolism and policies echoing a neoliberal narrative.

The Reconstruction and Development Policy (RSA, 1994), showing the original policy vision, transition for South Africa's education and training sector after the establishment of democratic governance. Secondly, a policy that also legally separated educational from training institutions and organizations that provide workplace training and established a national certification program, the White Paper on Education and Training (RSA, 1995b); the qualification levels for vocational education were defined under the framework (RSA, 1995a).

The qualifying educational credentials for training in the workplace and Regulations influencing the TVET industry included:

- The White Paper 4 (RSA, 1998a), which distinguished between public and private higher education; colleges of technical (now TVET) training.
- The public FET institutions established in the FET Colleges Act of 2006 (RSA, 2006a), by legal organisations; and

- TVET colleges centralised under the national Department of Higher Education and Training because of the White Paper for Post-School Education and Training (DHET, 2013).

Furthermore, the Skills Development Act of 1998 (RSA, 1998b), National Skills Development Strategies (DoL, 2005), and the White Paper for Post-School Education and Training (DHET, 2013) reorienting skills development training to public TVET colleges. These are all examples of policies resulted from a ‘political symbolism’ context, concurrent education and training policies that had an impact on both decentralization and privatization interventions in the TVET provision.

2.6 Students' Voices and Marginalised Groups in Vocational Education

The experiences and perspectives of marginalised and underrepresented groups in vocational education are crucial in understanding the barriers and challenges they face in accessing and benefiting from such programs. These groups may include students from socioeconomically disadvantaged backgrounds, racial and ethnic minorities, and individuals with disabilities (Haybi and Shoshana, 2021: 155). By foregrounding the voices of these learners, researchers and practitioners can gain insights into the unique needs and aspirations of marginalised students, which can contribute to the promotion of educational equity, social justice, and their empowerment in vocational education settings (Avis *et al.*, 2019: 48).

Research on the experiences of socioeconomically disadvantaged students in vocational education has highlighted the need for targeted support and interventions to address the challenges they face, such as limited access to resources, information, and networks (Dommers *et al.*, 2017: 8). By engaging the voices of these learners, educators can identify and implement strategies that promote social inclusion and enhance their access to educational and employment opportunities (Kersh and Laczik, 2021). For instance, initiatives such as mentoring programs, financial assistance, and targeted career guidance can help to empower disadvantaged students in vocational education settings, by addressing their specific needs and promoting their sense of belonging and self-efficacy (Lange *et al.*, 2020: 11).

The experiences of racial and ethnic minority students in vocational education are also essential to understanding the dynamics of discrimination, exclusion, and marginalisation in these settings

(Mezzanotte, 2022: 40). By listening to the voices of these learners, educators can develop culturally responsive and inclusive curricula, pedagogies, and support services that recognise and value the diversity of their backgrounds, experiences, and perspectives (Gay, 2018). Initiatives such as culturally sensitive teaching approaches, the recruitment and training of a diverse teaching workforce, and the promotion of multicultural education can help to create inclusive learning environments that foster the success and empowerment of minority students in vocational education (DeJaeghere & Zhang, 2008; Gay, 2013).

Students with disabilities often face unique challenges and barriers in accessing and participating in vocational education programs, due to factors such as inadequate resources, lack of accessibility, and negative attitudes and stereotypes (Morgan, 2023).

Engaging the voices of these learners can provide valuable insights into their needs, aspirations, and experiences, enabling educators and policymakers to develop and implement targeted strategies and accommodations that promote their inclusion and success in vocational education (Moriña, 2017). Examples of such strategies may include the provision of assistive technologies, the training of teachers in inclusive pedagogies, and the development of accessible and adaptable learning materials and assessments (Wahome, 2021; Ndlovu, 2021).

Foregrounding the voices of marginalised and underrepresented groups in vocational education is essential for promoting educational equity, social justice, and the empowerment of these learners. By engaging the perspectives and experiences of socioeconomically disadvantaged students, racial and ethnic minorities, and individuals with disabilities, researchers and practitioners can identify and implement targeted interventions and strategies that address the unique needs and aspirations of these learners, fostering their inclusion, success, and empowerment in vocational education settings.

2.7 Vocational Education in South Africa (SA)

The distinctive landscape of vocational education in South Africa is largely attributable to its historical context, shaped by both apartheid and colonialism. These forces engendered a labour market heavily reliant on inexpensive labour and a skills development structure steeped in racial and class-based stratification. This effectively resulted in a vocational practice that catered to the labour demands of extractive colonial states (McGrath *et al.*, 2020: 468).

In the post-independence era, the evolution of vocational education and training (VET) in South Africa has undergone several pivotal phases, as delineated by McGrath *et al.*, (2020). These phases primarily reflect the historical trajectories of modernisation, addressing basic needs and efforts towards curtailing exploitation. They offer an insightful perspective on the country's unfolding struggle to reconstruct its skills development landscape in the face of its intricate historical legacy.

Traditionally, the primary function of vocational education has been to cater to potential school dropouts and those earmarked based on their 'probable destiny,' predicated on perceived skills and capacities (Ogden, 1990). This view posits vocational education as a solution to the persistent issue of high drop-out rates characterising South African education (Weybright *et al.*, 2017:1).

However, Ogden (1990) cautions against viewing vocational education as merely a 'dumping ground' for traditional school failures, thereby raising questions about its capacity to serve students with different aptitudes and ambitions.

Under the apartheid regime, the liberal arts curriculum was typically reserved for upper- and middle-class white students, while vocational education primarily targeted marginalised students, equipping them with skills deemed essential for available jobs. However, this vocational tracking resulted in a rigid career trajectory, often limiting future career options and opportunities to re-enter academia due to an inadequate foundation in core subjects (Brush, 2016; The Centre for Development and Enterprise (CDE), 2012).

Despite these historical imbalances, contemporary South African education policy actively promotes enrolment in TVET colleges, embodying the New Labour's vision of equipping individuals with skills necessary for competitiveness in a globalised, high-skilled, high-wage economy. The introduction of vocational A-levels, now known as Bachelor of Technology (B-Tech), represents a crucial part of this strategy, offering specialist work-related qualifications across diverse sectors such as business, engineering, and ICT, and forming an integral part of the apprenticeship framework (Cuddy and Leney, 2005: 28; Thompson, 2015). Yet, while these advancements denote significant progress, the lingering threads of class distinctions within the vocational education sector are a testament to the enduring legacies of South Africa's past.

2.7.1 South African Education System Process

In 2003, technical colleges in South Africa were designated as further education and training (FET) colleges (South Africa. Western Cape Government, 2002). Since 2006, FET institutions received substantial funding from the government for infrastructure upgrades, more relevant curriculum introductions, staff training, and financial aid for college students (Engelbrecht, 2017). Initially, the only programs available were National Accredited Technical Education Diploma (NATED) courses, also referred to as National Qualification Course programs. Subsequently, the National Certificate (Vocational) NC(V) was introduced in 2007 for FET colleges nationally, with 11 programmes. The proposed NC(V) program was designed to address the perceived shortage of occupational skills in the nation, where artisanship predominated, and to further supply workplace-based skill sets in a variety of in-demand vocational disciplines (Engelbrecht, 2017: 1; WCED, 2009). This NC(V) program substituted some national qualification (NATED) N1, N2, and N3 courses at public FET colleges, first at Level 2 in 2007, Level 3 in 2008, and at Level 4 in 2009 (Makgato, 2019).

Courses offered through NC(V) are essentially alternatives to high school. The minimal prerequisite is passing Grade 9, although there are variations depending on the field of study. A one-year qualification is available for each NQF level (DHET, 2007). There are 14 categories that make up the NC(V) programs, primarily focused on the economic sectors of the South African economy. Each programme consists of seven subjects, the four vocational subjects and the three core subjects of language (first additional), mathematical literacy, and life orientation skills (DHET, 2007: 6).

National qualification NC(V) has three levels, the NC(V) Qualification (NQF) Levels 2, 3, and 4, which are equivalent to grades 10, 11, and 12 in traditional schools and similar equivalent to NATED Courses N1, N2, and N3. Each NQF level is offered as a one-year qualification (DHET, 2007).

The NATED (N's) course has further N4-N6 post-school qualifications which is equivalent to a diploma. Compared to academic education, the new era of highly competitive working

environments, when you do not have post-school education, you stand a little chance of getting a good job or starting a sustainable business which is why it is imperative in SA for students to proceed with the traditional academic schooling until they reach their grade 12 and continue with post-school education. It begins with getting good grade 11 results (overall 65% and more) that needs to stand out to get funding. This is because the bursary applications from the companies, government agencies and university programs close early, way before mid-year grade 12 reports can be issued by the schools (Department of Basic education (DBE), 2021). Hence, grade 11 results determine whether students will enter a degree program or a general university entrance, while grade 12 results confirm if they qualify into tertiary education.

2.7.2 The voices of learners in vocational education: A South African overview

The voices of learners within vocational education in South Africa form a critical component of understanding the impact and efficacy of this educational approach. Historically, due to apartheid and colonial impositions, the structure of skills development in South Africa was racially stratified and class based (Grath *et al.*, 2020: 468). As such, the impact on learners, particularly those hailing from marginalised backgrounds, requires a nuanced analysis.

In the early stages of vocational education, the key purpose of such programs was primarily to cater to potential dropouts or those perceived to have limited academic capabilities (Ogden, 1990: 247). Consequently, vocational education was considered by some to be a panacea for high dropout rates, a persistent issue within South Africa's educational landscape (Weybright *et al.*, 2017:1; Dougherty and Lombardi, 2016:334). However, this perspective has been contested due to the resultant stigma attached to vocational education, often perceived as a 'dumping ground' for traditional school failures (Ogden, 1990: 247).

The stigma attached to vocational education extends beyond the individual level, affecting societal perception and policymaking around these programs. Often, vocational education was seen as a lesser alternative to more conventional academic pathways, which predominantly catered to the upper and middle-class white students (Brush, 2016; The Centre for Development and Enterprise (CDE), 2012). Furthermore, vocational education is often perceived to offer limited opportunities

for career flexibility and the potential to re-enter higher education later in life due to its specialised focus.

In contemporary South Africa, vocational education, delivered primarily through Technical and Vocational Education and Training (TVET) colleges, continues to grapple with these stigmatising perceptions (Badenhorst and Radile, 2018). However, recent policy interventions have sought to elevate the status and value of vocational education. For example, the New Labour's vocational policy and the introduction of Vocational A-level, also known as Bachelor of Technology (B-Tech), aim to equip individuals with the necessary skills to compete in a globalised, high-skilled, and high-waged economy (Cuddy and Leney, 2005: 28; Thompson, 2015).

Despite these strides, the voices of learners suggest that vestiges of past inequities continue to linger. The extension of learning opportunities, vocational practice inclusivity, and the responsiveness to learners' needs remain areas of concern (Makgato, 2019). The under-resourced nature of many TVET colleges, alongside other logistical and technical challenges, often undermines the learner experience (Terblanche, 2017). The critical voices of learners highlight the need for further policy and practice adjustments, ensuring that the potential of vocational education in South Africa is fully realised.

2.8 Conclusion

In conclusion, the literature review presented in Chapter 2 provided a comprehensive overview of the research and theoretical foundations related to students' voices in vocational education, drawing on a range of perspectives and approaches from general education, theoretical underpinnings, and the experiences of marginalised groups. By examining the various ways in which students' voices have been incorporated into educational research and practice, this review has highlighted the significance of engaging learners as active participants in the design, implementation, and evaluation of vocational education programs and initiatives.

The theoretical foundations of students' voices in education, as exemplified by the works of Paulo Freire, John Dewey, and Jean Piaget, emphasise the importance of learner-centered approaches, democratic pedagogy, and student agency in fostering meaningful and effective learning

experiences. The research on students' voices in general education provides valuable insights into the methods and approaches employed to engage students' voices, such as participatory action research, student voice initiatives, and student-teacher partnerships, which may be applicable and adaptable to the context of vocational education.

Moreover, the literature review highlights the importance of considering the experiences and perspectives of marginalised and underrepresented groups in vocational education, including socioeconomically disadvantaged students, racial and ethnic minorities, and individuals with disabilities. By foregrounding the voices of these learners, researchers and practitioners can contribute to the promotion of educational equity, social justice, and the empowerment of marginalised students in vocational education settings.

This literature review has laid the groundwork for a deeper understanding of the role of students' voices in vocational education, serving as a foundation for future research and practice in this area. By building on the insights and lessons learned from the existing literature, researchers and practitioners can continue to explore innovative and effective ways of engaging students' voices in vocational education, with the aim of enhancing the quality, relevance, and inclusiveness of these programs for all learners.

In moving forward, it is important for researchers and practitioners to be attentive to the evolving needs, contexts, and challenges faced by students in vocational education, as well as the opportunities and constraints posed by new technologies, policies, and societal trends. By engaging in ongoing dialogue, reflection, and collaboration, the field of vocational education can continue to advance and refine its understanding and practice of students' voices, ensuring that the voices of all learners are valued, heard, and acted upon.

CHAPTER 3: CRITICAL SOCIAL POLICY FRAMEWORK: THEORY AND METHODOLOGY

3.1 Introduction

This study utilises the lens of Critical Social Policy to shed light on the intricacies of educational phenomena, acknowledging its value in uncovering the complex interplay between educational experiences and prevailing societal hierarchies. Critical Social Policy analysis posits that a deeper understanding of these connections and the dynamics of power and subordination therein is pivotal, especially considering the challenges aimed at disrupting these entrenched ties (Midley & Livermore, 2009).

The term 'critical' in philosophy and social science literature frequently refers to the scrutiny of capitalist transformations and the evolving structures of dominance associated with them. Against a backdrop of disparities between egalitarian rhetoric and the lived experiences of racial and class discrimination, the term also resonates with New Left, feminist, and anti-discriminatory policy analyses. The foundation of critical social policy tradition rests upon the intellectual contributions of numerous theorists, including the likes of Foucault, Habermas, Marx, Kant, Hegel, Weber, and Giroux (Midley & Livermore, 2009: 215; Kincheloe & McLaren, 1994). As such, the terrain of social policy encompasses an impressive breadth of perspectives.

In the context of this research, the ensuing sections will adopt a standpoint rooted in the epistemology of critical social policy. These sections will delineate the construction of neoliberal policies, a process often clouded by the concept of 'political symbolism'. The analysis will then incorporate theoretical frameworks, such as the theories of Cultural, Social, and Human Capital, which endeavor to elucidate the multifaceted factors shaping students' educational choices.

Furthermore, the Postmodernism theory, which highlights the impacts of neoliberal practices in education, will be explored. This theory champions the importance of students' autonomy in educational choice and urges the abandonment of policies that mirror the interests of an elite minority to the detriment of the wider populace. Following the exploration of these theoretical frameworks, a comprehensive discussion of the research design, data collection, and analysis procedures will be presented, along with the ethical considerations that underpinned this research process. This methodological insight will provide a robust basis for the rigorous examination of student voices in vocational education in Pretoria, South Africa.

3.2 Critical social policy epistemology

Epistemology refers to the way in which we acquire knowledge and theories of what constitutes that knowledge and understanding of a particular phenomenon (Godwin *et al.*, 2021). This is an approach that explains how we understand the things that we know to be true “explaining ourselves as knowers, how we arrive at our beliefs” as O’Gorman and MacIntosh (2014: 54) articulates. Critical theorists begin with the premise that “men and women are essentially unfree and inhabit a world rife with contradictions and asymmetries of power and privilege” (McLaren, 2008: 61). They contend that social reality (structures, norms, and constructions of knowledge) is often formed around the interests of a dominant culture such as today’s sophisticated capitalist societies and state institutions, which are repressive as they systematically reflect the interests of certain societal groups at the disadvantage of others (Lemert, 2002).

This is evident in the educational space, vocational education today is still guided by neoliberal policies and principles built on the flawed premise that only conceived supply-side skills development will address economic growth and social inequalities while encroaching on the existential space provided by education (McGrath *et al.*, 2020). Behind these policies are the elite classes and business entities that make educational decisions at the expense of the actual needs of students compromised for their own business purposes (Abramovitz, 1996). This proves that students’ voices are excluded from the knowledge production of policies and not regarded as credible. Hence, to encounter this exclusion of students’ reality, the critical social policy seeks to advocate for the government and educational structures to gather themselves and be inclusive as possible of students’ needs and communities in their policy processes and execution.

In terms of analysing students’ career choices, critical social policy framework is grounded in the belief that individuals are not completely free to choose their career paths. Rather, their choices are shaped by the social, political, and economic systems in which they live (Claridge, 2018; Farias, 2014). This framework examines the ways in which these systems influence the career decisions of students.

The first step, this framework identifies the major social, political, and economic forces that shape students’ career choices. This includes factors such as economic inequality, gender roles, cultural

norms, and access to education (Bourdieu, 1986). It is important to understand the intersectionality of these forces and how they impact students' decisions.

The second step is to examine the ways in which these forces shape students' choices. This includes looking at the power dynamics between students and their parents, teachers, and peers. It also involves understanding the role of higher education and the job market in students' career decisions.

The third step is to analyse the impact of these forces on students' career decisions. This includes looking at how students perceive their options, how they evaluate the potential benefits and drawbacks of different career paths, and how they navigate the job market. It also involves understanding how students make decisions about their future considering their current circumstances.

Finally, this framework looks at the implications of these forces for students' career choices. This includes understanding the implications for social mobility and economic disparities, as well as the implications for access to education and career opportunities. This analysis can help to identify areas where policy interventions are needed to ensure that students have access to the resources, they need to make informed decisions about their career paths.

3.3 Cultural, Social and Human Capital

Building upon the preceding section, it is important to delve deeper into the dynamics of education, specifically the interplay between students and the underlying factors that shape their educational choices. Critical theorists emphasise the importance of critically examining these factors and analysing the power dynamics and inequalities inherent in educational systems. By comprehensively exploring these influences, a deeper understanding can be attained regarding how students navigate and make choices within the educational landscape:

3.3.1 Critical Social Capital

Critical Social capital theorists conceive that the social networks and resources available to individuals shape their educational opportunities and outcomes (Claridge, 2018). They suggest that individuals who are embedded in more networks with higher levels of social capital, including resources like trust, information, and influence (p. 5), will have greater access to educational

opportunities and be more likely to pursue higher education. At a macro level, social capital theory suggests that the structure and norms of social networks influence educational outcomes. For example, communities with strong ties between families and institutions, such as schools, may provide more resources and opportunities for students to pursue higher education.

At an individual level, social capital theory suggests that students can draw on personal relationships to access educational opportunities, such as strong family or community connections that can provide emotional support, resources, and access to information. The core idea of social capital theory is that individuals are embedded in social networks that provide resources and opportunities, which in turn shape educational outcomes. Thus, variables such as family and community structure, cultural beliefs, and economic resources all contribute to the educational choices of students. By understanding how social capital shapes educational outcomes, we can better understand the factors that influence students' educational choices.

3.3.2 Critical Cultural Capital

A pivotal influence on students' career decisions is the concept of Cultural Capital, as postulated by Critical Cultural Capital theorists. Cultural Capital constitutes the sum of knowledge, acculturation, customs, and "habitus" inherited across generations rather than acquired through formal education (Bourdieu, 1986: 241). This theory pivots around two primary constructs: the concept of Cultural Capital itself, and the idea of Symbolic Capital. The former encapsulates language fluency, familiarity with cultural practices, and other forms of cultural knowledge. The latter, Symbolic Capital, signifies the societal recognition and respect earned by individuals, families, or communities through the possession of Cultural Capital (Bourdieu & Passeron, 1977: 32).

Applying this theory to career choices, students with parental encouragement towards vocational education are more likely to enroll in Technical and Vocational Education and Training (TVET) colleges early on (Farias, 2014: 27). These cultural beliefs significantly shape learners' decision-making processes, exemplified by eighth-grade learners who plan to join the workforce directly after high school showing a greater inclination towards vocational education (Farias, 2014: 20). However, it remains uncertain whether these perspectives are rational (Farias, 2014: 27), yet they might be integral to unravelling the puzzle this study seeks to decipher.

The type of Cultural Capital most valued, often internalised by the elite and upper-class families, serves to uphold their privilege and status. Evidence suggests a strong link between higher Cultural Capital and students' decision to continue academic schooling rather than opting for TVET colleges (Farias, 2014:20). Hence, a student's career choice and attainment are significantly influenced by the Cultural Capital of their family, peers, schools, teachers, and community (Bourdieu, 2002: 27; St. John *et al.*, 2011).

The theory of Cultural Capital implies that the quality and quantity of an individual, family, or community's Cultural Capital substantially determines educational outcomes. For instance, individuals and families with greater Cultural Capital may have access to superior educational resources, including high-quality schools and extracurricular activities (Bourdieu, 1986: 248). Additionally, the type and amount of Cultural Capital an individual, family, or community possesses can significantly impact their educational choices. Individuals and families with higher Cultural Capital levels are often better equipped to identify educational opportunities tailored to their needs and interests and are more likely to pursue them (Lareau & Weininger, 2003: 568).

Cultural Capital theory postulates that an individual, family, or community's Cultural Capital can also influence the type of educational institutions chosen. Individuals and families with a higher Cultural Capital level may opt for more prestigious institutions, while those with lower levels might lean towards less prestigious ones (Bourdieu & Passeron, 1977: 72). This highlights the profound influence of Cultural Capital on educational and career decisions, further complicating the dynamics of student career choices.

3.3.3 Human Capital

Critical social theorists attempt to explain factors influencing students' educational choices by considering the role of investments in human capital. Human capital is an accumulation of investments in people, such as knowledge, skills, and abilities, which can be used to generate economic and social benefits (Schultz, 1963; Farias, 2014; 5). Which is to say, investments in human capital can increase an individual's earning potential and overall life satisfaction. The human capital theory suggests that individuals make an investment in human capital by choosing an educational program and by investing in the skills and knowledge required for success in that program. This investment is motivated by the expected returns from the educational choices. The

returns can be direct, such as improved job opportunities or increased income, or indirect, such as increased self-esteem or overall life satisfaction.

The theory further suggests that individuals weigh the costs and benefits of educational choices. The costs might include the price of tuition, opportunity costs, and other economic costs, such as the cost of learning materials or transportation. The benefits might include increased earning potential, improved job opportunities, increased self-esteem, or overall life satisfaction. The theory also suggests that individuals consider other factors when making educational choices, such as the quality of education, the reputation of the educational institution, or the availability of financial aid. Individuals may also consider the social influences on their choice, such as friends and family, or the expectations of their peers (Schultz, 1963; Farias, 2014). Thus, human capital theory attempts to explain factors influencing students' educational choices by considering the role of investments in human capital, the costs and benefits of educational choices, and other factors that might affect an individual's decision.

Moreover, the theory of human capital analysis is widely used to make educational decisions, but it has been criticised for its impoverished understanding of the possibilities of education and its focus on productivity and Gross Domestic Product (GDP) growth as proxies for educational quality. Constructivists have argued that the human capital paradigm is flawed due to its privileging of technical solutions and positivist approaches to development. From this perspective, the focus on narrow versions of testing, school choice, and management and accountability reform overlooks other important goals of education, such as social cohesion and democratic development (Balwanz 2015: 27; McGrath, 2012a). This criticism suggests that the human capital argument fails to capture the complexity of the educational process and the potential of education to empower individuals and promote social change.

The human capital argument is a valid rationale for investing in education. It provides a useful framework for understanding the decision-making process related to educational investments and enables individuals to increase their earnings and productivity through knowledge and skills. However, it has been criticised for its focus on productivity and GDP growth and its privileging

of technical solutions and positivist approaches to development. Thus, to ensure that investments in education effectively contribute to national well-being, this study will take into consideration the limitations of the human capital argument and consider other approaches to education.

3.4 Critical Post-Modernism

Lastly, post-modernism is a critical lens which can be used to analyse the effects of neo-liberal practices on education. The critical postmodern approach to education in this study mostly extracts from Michel Foucault's work, rejects the notion of universal rationality and introduces a radical critique against the Modernist epistemological methodology. It argues that neo-liberal practices undermine any sense of equality, collective action and public engagement, leading to a condition of privatisation where power is concentrated in the hands of the few (Marinopoulou, 2017: 82). Critical post-modernists view education as an ideological tool employed by those in power to maintain their dominance and reproduce their privilege. They argue that neo-liberal policies create and reinforce economic, social and cultural inequalities, with many of the benefits accruing to the wealthy and powerful (Ross & Gibson, 2007; 2). Furthermore, postmodernism views neo-liberal practices as a form of colonisation that generates new forms of oppression, such as the financialisation of education, the commodification of knowledge and the control of the public sphere. Neo-liberal policies have led to the commodification of education, with students being treated as consumers and educational outcomes being measured in terms of marketability and profitability. Neo-liberalism has also resulted in the erosion of public services, including education, and has resulted in the privatisation of education.

To challenge these neo-liberal practices, critical post-modernists employ a variety of analytical tools, such as critical discourse analysis and cultural studies (Torres, 2002: 378; Mogashoa, 2014). These tools allow them to examine the language used to discuss neo-liberal policies and the cultural implications of neo-liberalism. Critical post-modernists also advocate for strong emancipatory, democratic, and anti-discriminatory social liberation goals. They argue that the current power structures must be challenged to create a more equitable and just society.

To achieve this goal, this study will utilise the post-modernists advocacy and empowerment method. To analyse marginalised/oppressed individuals, students in this case, to evaluate society, institutions as well as their own values and views through critical social policy. It also calls for the South African government to become more inclusive of student and community needs in their policy processes and execution. With the hope that people, groups, and communities will become informed, organised, and empowered, leading to emancipatory action and praxis that will bring about social change.

This was to emphasise the importance of understanding the multiple perspectives of any given issue, and it is through this process of synthesis that knowledge can be created. This approach consolidates with this study for the main reason that it underlines the importance of recognising that knowledge is a socially constructed phenomenon and is thus subject to constant change. This means that knowledge must be seen as something that is continually being negotiated, and that this negotiation occurs within the context of a specific social, political and economic environment. Therefore, when looking at the effects of neo-liberal practices on education, this study will consider not only the economic and political factors, but also the social and cultural ones.

Critical postmodernism theory also suggests that knowledge is not just something to be acquired, but also something to be actively engaged with (Kant, 2006). This means that knowledge is something that should be actively debated and discussed, as well as something to be critically evaluated and reworked. Postmodernism theory provides a useful lens to interpret the effects of neo-liberal practices on education, as it allows us to look beyond the economic and political factors and to consider the social and cultural context within which these practices are enacted. Thus, postmodernism theory offers a comprehensive framework for interpreting the effects of neo-liberal practices on education and can provide a useful tool for engaging with and critiquing the current state of education.

This section has explored the relationship between educational choices of students and the critical social policy framework. It has identified three key aspects - social capital, cultural capital, and human capital - that are believed to be influential in the decision-making process of students.

Through the analysis of these aspects, it has become clear that the social, economic, and cultural forces in which students are embedded shape their educational choices. These forces include family and community structure, cultural beliefs, economic resources, and social networks, which all have an impact on students' educational decisions. Furthermore, the human capital theory has been examined and it has been found to provide a valid rationale for investing in education. However, it has been criticised for its focus on productivity and GDP growth and its privileging of technical solutions and positivist approaches to development. Finally, postmodernism theory has been explored and it has been found to provide a useful framework for understanding the effects of neo-liberal policies on education, as well as providing an advocate for strong emancipatory, democratic, and anti-discriminatory social liberation goals. It is with hope that this paper will provide a useful starting point for further research into the relationship between educational choices and critical social policy.

The next section explores the methodology that was followed in this study.

3.5 METHODOLOGY

Schwardt (2007) defines methodology as a 'theory of how an inquiry should proceed', analysing the presumptions, guiding concepts, and methods used in a certain approach to inquiry (p.195). Hence, it is through the methodology that this critical social policy research differs with other traditional research approaches. In a sense that, many studies that looked at factors influencing students' decisions mostly relied on different methodological and theoretical processes and less on critical-dialectic perspective which attempts to 'dig beneath the surface of the historically specific, oppressive and social structures', in short, a critical social policy lens (Harvey, 2011; Farias, 2014). Furthermore, other studies that sought to elicit student perspectives for vocational education career choice have conducted interviews with students who are primarily in their eighth grade, 13 years old, or who are about to turn 18 years old, when parental influence over decision-making is greatest. As well as studies that primarily focuses on dropouts whose decision-making for enrolling at TVET college was influenced by the same reason that they dropped out. As well as conceptual papers with no empirical data, indicating that responses may be somewhat skewed. In response, Gaffoor and Van der Bijl (2019) emphasised that more study is necessary to have a thorough

knowledge of why so many students choose to pursue vocational education over academic education.

Against this backdrop, this study will examine students' decisions to enroll at TVET colleges (for vocational education) over academic education at secondary level through the lens of social/educational policy, effects of neo-liberalism on educational policies. Bridging the age gap between respondents by concentrating on students over the age of 18, who have more years of experience from both secondary school and TVET college to help elicit a variety of voices for a clearer picture of students' perceptions. Due to the significance of this section, it will begin by discussing the research design used to yield students experiences utilised to inform decisions. Followed by the discussion of data collection process, sampling and ethical consideration.

3.5.1 Research design

Research design is defined as a conceptual 'blueprint', plan of action within which the research is conducted (Akhtar, 2016). McCombes (2019) further articulates that it is a general plan aimed at answering research questions in an empirical study. To this study, an exploratory qualitative research design was used as a research strategy to draw on the voices of youth and underprivileged populations in relation to education policy impacted by the skills discourse to answer research questions.

This was to be done by generating new concepts, theories and explanations to generate new reality as in the nature of this approach (Reiter, 2017:139). This exploratory design was relevant and appropriate in this study as it allows the researcher to inductively generate theory and a form of meaning from the perceptions of participants (Harvey, 2011). Its interpretivism approach is rooted in the phenomenology of a German philosopher, Edmond Husserl, particularly for the purpose of this study, as critical policy scholars also consolidates; to study the "lived experiences at a deeper level" (Qutoshi, 2018: 216). Hence, this exploratory design is advantageous in a way that it will assist the policy scholars and authorities to learn from the experiences of the student voices gathered in this study.

A Qualitative research design is known for its in-depth insight into a problem and answering research questions (Creswell, 2009: 143). Its strength lies with its ability to generate rich, detailed data that leave the participants "*perspective intact and provide a context for the phenomena being studied*" (Weinreich, 2009), in a context of a small number of samples. Quantitative design on the other hand, collects and analyse numerical data and test it on an already existing hypothesis and requires many samples, which is not the aim of this study (Harvey, 2011). This study seeks to explore students' experiences and their reasons behind choosing vocational education over academic education, incorporating their voices into the discourse of vocational education which makes the qualitative research design most suitable for this study. The following section will discuss the process utilised for sampling.

3.5.2 Sampling

Since this study is a qualitative explorative study in nature that does not require results to be generalised, a non-probability sampling was utilised. Purposive sampling was utilised to select participants conveniently, based on sampling criteria. Then followed by snowball sampling (requesting participants for reference to other people) as it is also purposive in its nature and orientation. Purposive sampling is a process where participants are divided into groups based on predetermined criteria relevant to a certain study issue and to answer research questions. The downside of purposive sampling is that it is not generalisable and does not yield a large representative of the population at hand. However, that is not in the interest of this study, this study aims to elicit the voices of students from a variety of viewpoints, which is vital as the interest lies with the experiences.

To determine the magnitude of purposeful sample size, a theoretical saturation was employed. A theoretical saturation is a point in data collection when new data no longer brings additional insights to the research questions, the code of saturation point is normally achieved at 9 interviews (p. 3). This study aims to target 15 students to answer the research questions. Hence, to elicit those unique answers in order to understand the reason for student choices selecting vocational schools over academic education.

The following purposive selection criteria was used:

- Participants should have left their traditional secondary schools for TVET institutions.
- Students should have gone for TVET College before completing their matric.
- Students must be aged 18 years old and above by the time of interview.
- Students must be enrolled in a registered vocational education institution in Pretoria.
- Students must be residing in Pretoria.

I used my personal networks as first point of reference for the first four participants. As soon as the first method was effective, the variation of respondents was necessary to be increased based on their locational context including their institutional location. I furthermore used the snowballing method, requesting the first group of those that were interviewed to refer me to others that they knew who reside in different townships and places apart from the ones they were situated in. Invitations were sent out to all participants, and each was informed that they are not bounded in any way from this interview. They can withdraw at any point to ensure that they do not feel pressured.

3.5.3 Data Collection: an on- going process

The data collection process commenced between November 2022 and December 2022. As the methods utilised for data collection and analysis are adaptable and contingent on the circumstances, revisions were made until the researcher was content with the selected approach, ensuring it provided ample opportunity for discovery, insightful responses to specific inquiries, or the formulation of new hypotheses. Consequently, it is improbable that the initial research design remained unchanged from the outset of data collection.

The relevant data was collected using semi-structured in-depth interviews. According to McCartan *et al.*, (2012), a semi-structured interview is a popular research approach in the social sciences that serves as the foundation for a variety of participatory research projects. A semi-structured interview, unlike structured interviews or questionnaire survey, is open, allowing new ideas to emerge during the interview because of how the interviewee responds. Semi-structured interviews were suitable in this study for its ability to shift a line of inquiry and move in new directions as additional data with its significant flexibility to ask follow-up questions and generate new topics based on the direction that participants take (Hennink *et al.*, 2011). Since this study is focused on gathering individualised personal information regarding students' backgrounds and

choices for vocational education, the interviewing technique approximated a spontaneous conversation and allowed the researcher and respondents to establish a rapport.

According to Zakaria and Musta'amal (2014: 2), it is vital for the researcher to build a rapport and good relationship with participants. When people lack understanding and trust, they seldom become skeptical and suspicious. As a result, participants may retain important knowledge or make up tales, and almost certainly would not act normally. The validity of the research data can be compromised by this. Hence, the basis of effective communication lies in mutual trust and understanding. To establish a rapport, the researcher generated 'small talks' with participants that lasted approximately 2-3 minutes each just before the actual interview. Engaging about general things such as life in general, highlights of their career paths and so on, just to ease participants to feel free and build relationship and respect towards each other at the same time.

3.5.4 Interviewing

Initially, interviews were supposed to take place face-to-face, however, due to Covid-19 they were conducted online. Interviews were done on WhatsApp and others were resorted to telephonically (cellphone) since many participants had phones that could not browse internet for apps such as Microsoft teams and some were not familiar with how they operate.

Since, learners above 18 years have acquired and developed English from early childhood to high school, and their reading and learning experiences from foundation phase are solid; interviews were not to be translated in local languages such as Setswana, Tsonga, Zulu etc. However, there is one participant who unintentionally, kept on referring to speaking her home language in Setswana. Her transcript was written exactly as she spoke and translated her mother tongue to English language.

The researcher explained the terminologies that learners find them difficult to understand and did the reflective writing of notes (memoing) for interview responses. Hence, all standard procedures were followed. The responses were voice recorded with the camera turned off to protect their anonymity and privacy. Interviews were voice recorded and furthermore transcribed. Information verbatim was ensured for accuracy. Monosyllabic and poor grammar was also included since English is not their mother tongue.

3.5.5 Data Collection: Challenges

During data collection process, this study had its own challenges just as in any other research study, such as:

- Two students who had no money for cellphone data or to visit internet café to scan the declaration forms which resulted in a prolonged time for them to send the forms back.
- Since interviews occurred during the pandemic of Covid -19, the restrictions might have affected the collection of data due to people's unavailability –also depending on the various Covid level restrictions.
- There was meeting disruptions such as WhatsApp/phone call pausing, and connectivity problems where we could not hear each other. Technology and network challenges may have disrupted the quality of communication also due to overloaded networks since most people were operating from home. However, after resuming the interview, conversations were repeated from where it left off before interruption.

3.5.6 Methods of Analysis

In undertaking the qualitative analysis of the selected secondary data, we employed thematic analysis as our primary strategy. Thematic analysis was chosen for its suitability in identifying and exploring patterns, themes, and meanings within the rich content of the data (Braun & Clarke, 2006). The choice of thematic analysis aligns with our research objective of understanding the motivations for choosing vocational education over academic education, as it facilitates a nuanced exploration of themes related to students' decision-making processes.

The decision to use thematic analysis was deliberate, considering its compatibility with the narrative nature of the secondary data and its ability to uncover underlying patterns and meanings. This choice was guided by the nature of our research questions and the aspiration to gain in-depth insights into the experiences and motivations of students in vocational education. This process allowed for a systematic extraction of key insights contributing to addressing our research questions. However, it is crucial to acknowledge that, like any analytical strategy, thematic analysis has its limitations, including the potential for subjective interpretation. We remain cognizant of these limitations in interpreting the findings.

While thematic analysis was the chosen strategy, we acknowledge that other approaches, such as content analysis or grounded theory, are commonly used in qualitative research. The rationale for not opting for these methods lies in our focus on the narrative nature of the secondary data and the desire for a more focused exploration of specific themes. This strategic decision is in line with our research objectives and the unique nature of the data under investigation.

In summary, the application of thematic analysis provides a systematic and nuanced exploration of the motivations behind choosing vocational education. The choice of this strategy is well-founded in its compatibility with our research goals, allowing for a detailed understanding of the experiences and decisions of students in vocational education.

3.5.6.1 Thematic Narrative Analysis

Narrative research is based on the premise that people understand and give meaning to their lives through the stories they tell (Andrews *et al.*, 2013; McMullen and Braithwaite, 2013). In doing so, people utilise narratives to compose and order their life experiences. Using story forms, people account for and give meaning or significance to their lives (Bleakley 2010). Among the early proponents of narrative research include Connelly and Clandinin (1990) who proposed to put the person back to the center of research inquiry ensuring that people's voices are not lost in translation. The two main elements comprising this approach are participants' account of a particular experience and the exploration of meaning embedded in the participant's stories.

Narrative analysis is utilised as the mode of analysis for this current study. Narrative analysis can be defined as a way of examining a range of texts that all have a storytelling component. These texts may be created by governments, social movements, organisations, students, professionals, ethnic/racial groups, and individuals, and they communicate stories of history, experience, and how the world should be (Riessman, 2005; Ntinda, 2018: 2). This study aims to investigate student decision-making when it comes to choosing vocational education over academic education at the secondary level. Through a narrative analysis of student career choices, this study will examine how various aspects including social policy influences students' decisions. By looking at the stories of the 'ordinary, marginalised, and muted individuals, and how they make sense of their experiences, claim identities, and develop their lives'; this research seeks to uncover the

disintegration of master narratives and its impact on student decisions (Langellier, 2001: 700). Furthermore, instead of relying on positivist approaches, this study focuses on analysing how choices are selected, organised, connected, and interpreted to be meaningful to an audience (Riessman: 2005: 2).

There are four main sub types (typologies) of narrative analysis according to Riessman (2005:2), namely:

1. The *Structural analysis* - This approach focuses on the 'way a story is told', emphasising the language used and the way it is investigated. Attention is placed on the form of the narrative, such as the use of narrative devices that make it persuasive, rather than solely on the confined content.
2. *Interactional analysis* - This approach considers the 'dialogue between the storyteller and the listener,' allowing the audience to gain information directly from the speaker. Interest shifts to the storytelling process as a collaborative process between teller and listener, which may be inserted into question-and-answer exchanges.
3. *Performative analysis* - This approach considers the context of the storytelling and the process of performance. This includes the actors involved, the setting, the dialogue between characters, and audience response. It is a form of social action, as it considers how the storyteller presents themselves to the audience, and how the audience interprets the story; and finally,
4. *Thematic analysis* - In this approach, 'interpretation' is the key tool used to make sense of the data mostly appropriate for this study. It focuses on the content of a text and focusing what is said. The assumption is that language is an unambiguous and direct route to meaning, the researcher collects multiple stories and develop conceptual groupings from the data. A typology of narratives organised by theme is typically used, with case studies or vignettes providing examples. Kiger and Varpio (2020: 2) defines thematic analysis as a process of unearthing data, illuminating, structuring, and organising key themes at various levels.

Thematic analysis was the most suitable approach chosen in this current study; For the main reason that it can be used to analyse common thematic elements across research participants, and to create a typology which furthers theory. Consequently, this study seeks to understand student's experiences, and explore their understanding for choosing vocational education over academic education. Thematic analysis reveals the complexity of the relationships between students and their educational choices. Furthermore, it can be seen how various factors come together to link students and the educational institutions associated with the social stigma, as well as economic, political, structural and cultural barriers (Nundkumar and Subban, 2020: 262).

Moreover, during interviews, the response of each participant may be different, sometimes similar but not identical. Hence, this approach enable the researcher to identify and compare common themes in participant interviews as well as discrepancies, even when the answers are entirely contradictory at times. This approach is important in this study as it allows a comparative analysis to show the conjunctions and variances of student's career decisions over time.

To undertake a thematic analysis, Braun and Clarke (2008) suggest that one should become familiar with the transcribed data before beginning. This is in line with Mauthner and Doucet's (1998) voice-centered relational method of analysis, which involves reading through the transcripts at least three times. This approach allows the researcher to examine the interviewee's narrative (individual perception of their own educational choices), as well as identify the causal relationships (factors influencing student choices) and contextualise the account within the wider socio-political framework (effects of neo-liberal policies and practice on education). Through multiple readings of the transcripts, the researcher can gain an understanding of the individual's perceptions of their educational choices, as well as the factors that have influenced these decisions. After reading, analysing and coding of data process, the following themes emerged:

- Academic versus vocational education: TVET College perceived an 'easier' educational route.
- Quality of education: Challenges at secondary school level
- TVET perceived Link to employment faster
- Challenges hindering student progress at TVET college.

As soon as data analysis was concluded, the researcher discussed the above themes divided them into both main and sub-themes. These results reported on individual choices, as well as choices within broader social, economic, structural, political and cultural context. This method is relevant in this research study as it enables the researcher to show how students are less informed regarding the vocational education and training (TVET) that they choose, and often the mistaken views of TVETs perceived as being inferior to universities and other higher education institutions; it “uncovers the underlying ideologies embedded in stories and the larger culture that creates the narratives” (Rodriguez, 2016; 128).

The following section examines how my role and identity altered the research process, including the balance of power between me as the researcher and the individuals involved.

3.5.7 Reflexivity/ reflexive interviewing: Our research Journey

Embarking on this research journey demands a high degree of reflexivity, particularly when considering my own role as a young black woman investigating the lives and experiences of black men. Reflexivity is a critical process that entails acknowledging and interrogating our preconceptions, biases, and positionalities within the research context, thereby shaping how we understand and interpret our participants' experiences (Guillemin & Gillam, 2004: 274).

As a young black woman studying black men and women, the concepts of "insider" and "outsider" come to the fore. Insider and outsider positions are complex, multifaceted concepts. Being an "insider" typically implies a shared identity, experience, or knowledge between the researcher and participants, while an "outsider" denotes a lack of these shared attributes (Dwyer & Buckle, 2009: 57). In the context of my research, I would regard myself as both an insider and an outsider.

Our shared racial and cultural background provides an element of insider status, as it lends me an inherent understanding of the cultural nuances, language, and shared experiences that can profoundly influence our perceptions and interpretations. This shared race and cultural identity may foster a sense of familiarity and trust, potentially facilitating open and honest conversations (Merriam *et al.*, 2001: 405).

On the other hand, I am an outsider in terms of gender. As a woman studying men, there are gender-specific experiences, perspectives, and social dynamics that I do not personally experience. This outsider status can offer a unique vantage point, allowing me to ask questions and challenge

assumptions that someone immersed in that gender's lived experiences might not consider (Merton, 1972: 15). The challenge lies in navigating these dual positions, engaging in reflexivity to ensure that my interpretations and understanding of the participants' experiences are nuanced, respectful, and authentic.

Turning to researching the lives of young black women, my insider status is more pronounced. Sharing gender, race, and cultural experiences allows me to relate deeply to the participants' experiences, possibly making rapport building and empathetic understanding more accessible (DeLyser, 2001: 443). This insider perspective can be instrumental in eliciting rich, nuanced narratives and interpreting them with an inherent understanding of their socio-cultural context.

However, it is essential to approach this with caution. While my shared experiences could facilitate empathy and understanding, they could also lead to assumptions or over-identification, potentially clouding my analytical perspective (Blakey, 2007: 62). Reflexivity becomes crucial here, requiring a continuous interrogation of my biases, preconceptions, and emotional responses to ensure an ethical, balanced, and nuanced analysis.

Furthermore, with regards to my positionality as a young Black Masters student with educational experiences in Johannesburg, Northwest (Potchefstroom), and Pretoria, I was in a privileged position to analyse and advocate for justice. Hence, I took responsibility to make sincere efforts to not impose my own understanding regarding justice education onto those I spoke with, and to not be judgemental of their life and educational decisions. For instance, when I spoke with Kabelo, a 22-year-old male who had dropped out of school and was forced to enroll in a technical and vocational education and training (TVET) program, he expressed regret at his life circumstances and hinted that he wished he were in a different position than he is. He remarked that I was “lucky” to be able to go to university. His words made me reflect on the power structure between us, and how vastly different our lives and circumstances were. I took responsibility to empathise and be mindful of this power balance, so to not impose my privileged positionalities on him.

Similarly, prior to each research interview, I explained to participants that the purpose of the interview was research related. Despite this explanation, it was evident that some participants viewed me as an authority figure from the government who could aid in addressing their issues. For instance, Kulani (23) was still addressing that he felt he had to pay for his studies, since he

believed that Technical and Vocational Education and Training (TVET) colleges do not receive assistance from the Department of Higher Education and when I asked if there was anything else he would like to discuss, he simply replied, "No, that's all." He seemed to be waiting for me to end the interview and then pleaded, "My sister, please tell them we are suffering, they must assist us." I deeply desired to help him and the many other disadvantaged individuals who experience marginalization. To navigate this situation, I practised caution and self-awareness while interacting with the students. Simultaneously, I made sure that I had grasped a thorough understanding of the various educational options available in South Africa, to not pass judgement on or make unwarranted assumptions about the lives of Kabelo and Kulani.

Ultimately, the goal is not to compartmentalise the research journey into clear-cut insider or outsider positions. Instead, the process encourages embracing the fluid, dynamic interplay between these positions and utilising reflexivity as a tool for ethical, rigorous, and empathetic research. By acknowledging and reflecting upon our positionalities and the power dynamics inherent in the research process, we can strive for more authentic, respectful, and equitable knowledge production (Pillow, 2003: 178).

3.5.8 Analysis procedure and Implications

Data was analysed using Hycner's (1999) five stages of explicitation process and elaborated as follows:

3.5.8.1 Bracketing and Reductionist

The first step consisted of listening to the recording and familiarise with the words, tone and expressions of participants and most importantly taking notes. Not forgetting to bracket in personal views/ presumptions and develop a holistic perception directly from the participants' personal experience.

3.5.8.2 Delineating units of meaning

The second step consisted of removing/ separating the statements that display the recorded phenomenon (students' choice for vocational education over academic education at secondary school level). Then reduced the redundant items and focused on repetitions.

3.5.8.3 Clustering of Units of Meanings to form themes

Thirdly, examined thoroughly the list of units of meanings by repeatedly going to the recorded interview and looking at the non-redundant items to identify the significant topics; and stimulate the 'essence of meaning of units within the holistic context ' (Sadala & Adorno, 2001; Hycner, 1999).

3.5.8.4 Summarizing the Interview

The fourth step consisted of a summary and combined all the themes prompted from the data to provide with a holistic context. Modified it where necessary.

3.5.8.5 Composite Summary

The final step was to identify all the common themes that emerged including individual variations (Hycner, 1999: 154). Then concluded by writing a summary of incorporated results reflecting the themes that emerged the context as well as a whole. Hence, when the results agree with what has been identified in literature review, it is an indication that students are still affected by the same reasons and/or issues influencing their educational choices that still needs attention and resolution. However, when results do not agree with literature review, it means there is another explanation or reasons pertaining to student's choice for vocational education over academic education. This method is rather a significant contribution in this study because not only most students will be heard but the minorities will also be acknowledged.

3.5.9 Ethical considerations

The research on students' voices in vocational education requires a strong commitment to ethical principles, given the potential sensitivity of the issues and the vulnerability of the participants involved. This section outlines the key ethical considerations that were followed in conducting this study, drawing on established guidelines and frameworks in the field of educational research (BERA, 2018; Creswell & Poth, 2018).

a) Respect for Diversity and Cultural Sensitivity

Given the diverse backgrounds and experiences of the students involved in the study, it was crucial to approach the research with respect for diversity and cultural sensitivity (Liamputtong, 2018). This entailed being mindful of the participants' cultural, linguistic, and social contexts, as well as

adopting research methods and instruments that were appropriate and non-discriminatory. For example, when interviewing participants, the researcher avoided assumptions about the participants' experiences and instead used open-ended questions to facilitate their stories. This allowed the researcher to gain a better understanding of the participants' perspectives and experiences in the context of their own culture and values. The researcher also engaged in reflexivity and self-awareness (as previously discussed in section 3.5.7), recognising her own biases, assumptions, and potential influence on the research process and outcomes (Tracy, 2021).

b) Confidentiality

According to Research Ethics Boards (2017) confidentiality in research is of utmost importance for any researcher who use human subjects in their research. Adequate security measures must be in place to protect participant privacy and data against unauthorised access, use, disclosure, alteration, loss, and theft (p. 3). It is the main role of researchers to take appropriate precautions to preserve private and sensitive data that participants would not ordinarily want to expose to others or make public, creating a safe space context for participants (Guillemin & Gillam, 2019).

Tolich (2004) built on a concept of 'external' and 'internal' confidentiality to refer to ethical and moral quandaries that the researchers face. `In order to protect confidentiality of all members of dyads, the information provided by the participants was not disclosed to any of them, as well as their referrals, to ensure that the data collected is secure, and the study results are to be reported in a way that does not identify individual participants even after the information is published (Ummel and Achille, 2016: 808; Sieber,1992). To ensure external confidentiality, participants were assured that the information they provided would be kept private (Ummel and Achille, 2016: 808). All data collected during the study were securely stored and only accessible to the research team, ensuring that the participants' privacy and confidentiality were safeguarded (Clark & Creswell, 2020). Participant's names and contact details were gathered separately to be able to contact them later in case of unclear data and missing information.

c) Voluntary participation and Informed consent

The process of recruiting participants was not such a difficult process since it was realised- as previously stated, that majority of participants thought the researcher was an authority who came

to rescue and assist them with their challenges they were experiencing in their immediate institutions. Although, snowballing data collection method where participants are gathered through referrals, this method can be used when the target population of a study is hard to reach or identify, and it relies heavily on the participants to refer other individuals who fit the criteria for the study. As such, it can be difficult to maintain a voluntary participation if one member of the dyad feels pressured to join because the other has agreed to do so. To ensure that the recruitment process is not intrusive (Forbat and Henderson, 2003), as well as to ensure a voluntary participation, each member in the dyad was given the opportunity “to choose to participate or not, and to withdraw without explanation or justification” (Ummel and Achille, 2016: 808).

Once the dyad members agreed to partake in the research, the consent process was followed. Participants were informed of how, and to what extent, confidentiality would be protected. During this process, the limitations of external and internal confidentiality were explained. As protecting the confidentiality of both dyad members may limit the ways in which findings could be disseminated, it would be admonished to juxtapose the verbatim of members of the same dyad (Ummel and Achille, 2016). Therefore, a limited confidentiality was offered, and participants were warned that internal confidentiality might be compromised, that is the risk of “verbatim or other information may be recognizable to the other dyad member” (p. 808). Both external and internal confidentiality were maintained, and participants gave consent after being informed of the possible risks of internal confidentiality.

d) Anonymity

The concept of confidentiality is closely tied to anonymity and is generally considered to be an ethical requirement in social research (Miller *et al.*, 2019; Dube, Mhlongo and Ngulube, 2014). Anonymity ensures that no information with regards to participants identity is included in the final research reports, protecting them from potential harm, embarrassment, loss of reputation, legal trouble, and other consequences of their participation (Dube *et al.*, 2014: 202). It is a ‘rule of thumb’ according to orthodox research that data should be presented in such a way that respondents should remain unrecognisable. This is especially important when research is conducted in indigenous

settings, where participants may be more willing to share their knowledge, culture, and beliefs, but only if their identity is kept confidential.

However, there is evidence to suggest that some research participants may wish to be identified and associated with their information (Smith, 1999; Dube *et al.*, 2014: 208). In these cases, anonymity was not seen as a default choice but instead as an option discussed and agreed upon between the researcher and research participants. Participants were given an opportunity to choose whether to participate in the research and if they prefer their names to remain anonymous (Wiles *et al.*, 2008; Svalastog and Eriksson, 2010; Dube *et al.*, 2014). Although, some participants released personal information upon data collection that could potentially harm their relationships (with their teachers, friends and/or relatives), names were altered to protect internal confidentiality even though they consent with their real names. Furthermore, pseudonyms were used to ‘protect their privacy’ (Curtiss, 1977: xiii); Curtiss (1977) used the term *child’s rehabilitation* to explain that privacy is essential to an entity’s restoration nor reintegration from a particular situation or stigma.

e) Avoidance of Harm/ Non-maleficence

The principle of non-maleficence requires researchers to avoid causing any harm or distress to the participants in the research process, whether physical, psychological, or social (Lazar *et al.*, 2020). In this study, efforts were made to minimise any potential risks and harms associated with the research activities, such as ensuring that the data collection methods were non-invasive and non-threatening, and providing support and resources for participants who may have experienced discomfort or distress during the study (Miller *et al.*, 2019).

No physical harm was expected to occur during the interview process, although it was important to consider the potential emotional harm that could result from participants reflecting on their past experiences, as well as the challenges they had in their lives which affected their educational choice and career paths.

To ensure that participants were not exposed to potential harm, an effort was made to ensure that participants felt at ease while they spoke, incorporating rapport talks (as previously discussed in section 3.5.3) to create a safe environment for one to express their thoughts, feelings, and

experiences (Zakaria and Musta'amal, 2014: 2). Moreover, the interviewer asked open-ended questions that allowed the participants to speak freely without judgment or bias. Participants were, furthermore, given the opportunity to provide feedback after the interviews. Additionally, each participant was debriefed and provided with a counselling service toll-free number in case they needed any further emotional or mental support.

Overall, the interview process was successful as most of the participants expressed after the interview process, that they found it to be a beneficial platform to discuss their educational paths and were grateful for the opportunity to express their thoughts. However, it was vital to note as well that some students felt a sense of 'inadequacy' and 'inferiority' when discussing their life and educational challenges.

f) Beneficence

The principle of beneficence emphasises the need for research to contribute positively to the well-being of the participants and society, by generating knowledge and understanding that can inform educational practice and policy (Creswell & Poth, 2018). Furthermore, researchers must also protect participants from exploitation; any information provided by participants through their study involvement must be protected (Barrow, Brannan and Khandhar, 2022). To protect participant in this study, their opinions that included other parties such as their teachers and financial institutions, was ensured that the data is kept secure and confidential. The researcher did not reveal the individual's identity or share their opinions with other people or organisations (Ummel and Achille, 2016: 808).

In this study, the research findings are beneficent to relevant stakeholders, such as educators, policymakers, and vocational education institutions, as well as academia; with the aim of enhancing the integration of students' voices in vocational education and promoting more inclusive, equitable, and empowering learning experiences for all learners (Mertens & Ginsberg, 2017).

g) Justice

The principle of justice states that research participants should be permitted to 'fair treatment and privacy'. The selection of research participants must be based on research questions and requirements and must not exclude any group or be biased towards any specific group.

Furthermore, those who decline to participate in a study should be treated without prejudice (Barrow, Brannan and Khandhar, 2022). To ensure the principle of justice in this study was to look at the experiences of students in vocational education from various colleges in Pretoria. The researcher ensured that the selection of participants is representative of the overall target population and should not exclude any group based on their vulnerability or ease of access. Additionally, the researcher treated those who decline to participate in the study equally and without any prejudice.

In conclusion, the ethical considerations outlined in this section were integral to the research process and outcomes of this study on students' voices in vocational education. By adhering to these principles and guidelines, the research aimed to ensure that the participants' rights, well-being, and dignity were protected and respected, while generating valuable insights and knowledge that can contribute to the ongoing development and improvement of vocational education practice and policy.

3.5.10 Setting

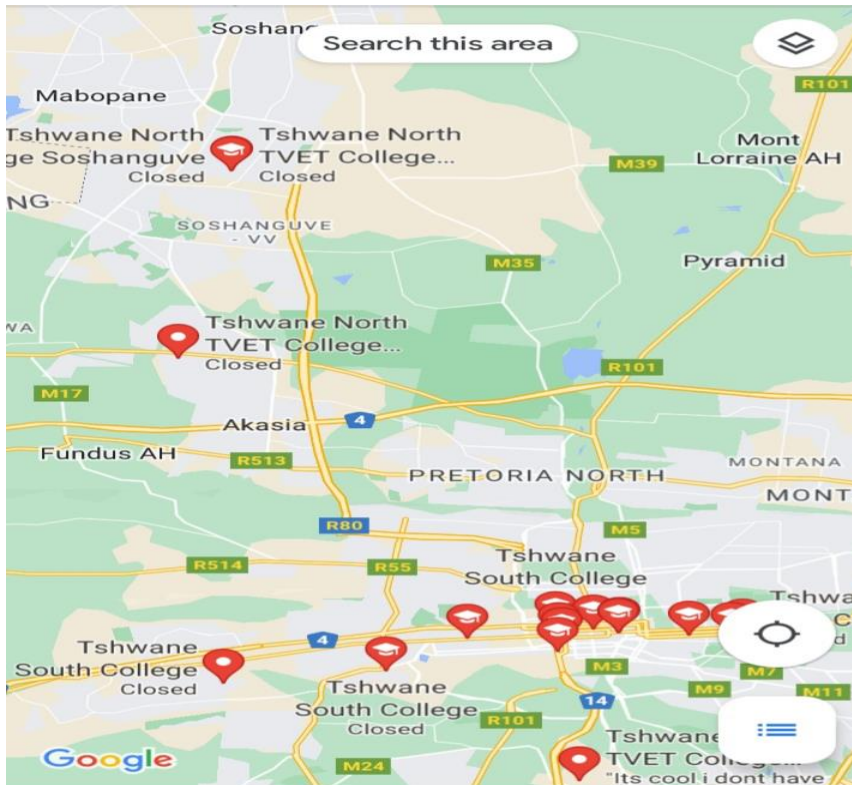


Figure 1: This is an image of the research site where TVET colleges are in Pretoria (Google Maps)

The study was conducted in Pretoria, as the map depicts above. The research primarily yield data from specifically students around Pretoria, in Gauteng province enrolled at vocational schools (TVET College) Tshwane North and Tshwane South.

While majority of participants grew up and live in Pretoria townships surrounding the colleges such as, Lethabile, Kgabalatsane, Winterveld, two in Soshanguve, two in Atteridgeville, Hammanskraal, Mamelodi, Olievenhout and Acadia. Some of them are originally from other provinces such as one respondent who grew up in Mafikeng, two Mpumalanga, one in Free State, one in Eastern Cape, and one in Limpopo and all moved to Pretoria to pursue their studies.

Majority of these vocational schools are in Peri-urban area and townships characterised by high levels of unemployment and subsequently, poverty. Peri-urban areas are further characterised by high rates of school dropouts and failure among learners. Majority of residents are black South Africans from the lower middle class, working class, and impoverished (Stats SA, 2022; Hartnack, 2017).

3.5.11 Demographic information of the participants

Table 3.5.11 Demographics of participants

No.	Pseudonym	Age	Gender	Location	Grew Up in	Left TVET College in grade	Course of Study
1	Smangaliso	(25) 2021	Male	Kgabalatsane	Mpumalanga	11	Civil Engineering
2	Mthokozisi	(21) 2021	Male	Kgabalatsane	Kgabalatsane	11	Mechanical (Fitting and Turning)
3	Zipokazi	(24) 2021	Male	Pretoria Acadia	Eastern Cape	11	Office admin

4	Karabo	(22) 2021	Female	Winterveld	Winterveld	11	Tourism
5	Dikeledi	(21) 2021	Female	Mabopane	Mabopane	11	Tourism
6	Kulani	(23) 2021	Male	Pretoria (Slovo)	Free State	11	Office Admin
7	Katlego	(24) 2021	Male	Soshanguve	Soshanguve	10	Business
8	Zintle	(22) 2021	Female	Sunnyside	Limpopo	11	Tourism
9	Kopano	(20) 2021	Male	Olievenhout (South of Pretoria)	Swaziland	11	Business entrepreneurship
10	Leticia	(20) 2021	Female	Lehlabile	Lehlabile	11	Financial and Accounting sciences
11	Kabelo	(22) 2021	Male	Lehlabile	Mafikeng	9	Financial and Accounting sciences
12	Mbali	(20) 2021	Female	Soshanguve	Soshanguve	10	Tourism
13	Nandipha	(23) 2021	Female	Hammanskraal	Hammanskraal	11(failed matric)	Tourism
14	Nonka	(24) 2021	Female	Mamelodi	Mamelodi	11(failed matric)	Tourism
15	Katiso	(21) 2021	Male	Atteridgeville	Atteridgeville	11	Office admin

The detailed profile of each participant is attached in the Appendix A section. A total number of 15 NC(V) students was recruited and interviewed as the table depicts above. Participants ranged between ages of 20 to 25 years old. Most participants were 22 years of age by the time of interview, four (4) respondents. There were three of 15 participants who were 20 and 21 years of age respectively. Two respondents were 23 years old and 25 years old, while one of 15 respondents were 24 years of age.

There were (9 of 15) male participants and (6 of 15) female counterparts. Majority of participants left school secondary school for TVET College in Grade 11 followed by those who left school in Grade 10 represented by three respondents. One of 15 respondents left school for TVET College in Grade 9. Participants had experience of the vocational education and their experiences aligned to the interview questions, which provided the study with an in-depth experience about Students' Voices in Vocational Education.

Since purposive sampling allows the researcher to gather qualitative responses, which leads to better insights and more precise research results (Serra, Psarra and O'Brien, 2018), most participants had more than one year within their area of learning; NC(V) experience, ranging from different levels two, three and four. Consequently, their occupational areas include Engineering, Accounting, Business management, Tourism and Office admin.

3.6 Conclusion

In conclusion, Chapter 3 has provided a comprehensive account of the methodological framework and design employed in this study on students' voices in vocational education. The research design presented in this chapter involved the use of various data collection methods, such as interviews, focus groups, and document analysis, which enabled the researchers to capture the rich and diverse perspectives of students in vocational education. By employing a combination of these methods, the study aimed to ensure the trustworthiness and rigor of the research findings, as well as to provide a nuanced and multifaceted understanding of the role of students' voices in vocational education.

Furthermore, the chapter discussed the sampling strategy, data analysis procedures, and ethical considerations that were integral to the research process. The purposive sampling technique was employed to recruit a diverse and representative sample of participants, while the thematic analysis

approach allowed for the identification of key themes and patterns in the data, which were then critically examined considering the existing literature and theoretical frameworks. Throughout the research process, ethical principles such as informed consent, confidentiality, respect for diversity, avoidance of harm, and beneficence were adhered to, ensuring that the rights and well-being of the participants were protected and respected.

In sum, the research methodology and design presented in Chapter 3 has provided a solid foundation for conducting a rigorous, in-depth, and contextually sensitive exploration of students' voices in vocational education. By employing, a well thought out and systematic research process, this study has generated valuable insights and knowledge that can contribute to the ongoing development and improvement of vocational education practice and policy, with a focus on empowering students as active partners and agents in their own learning experiences.

CHAPTER 4: STUDENTS' CHOICE FOR VOCATIONAL OVER ACADEMIC EDUCATION IN CONTEXT

The preceding chapter, Chapter 3, embarked upon a journey to delve into the intricate dynamics of education and its influence on students. It was guided by the lens of critical social policy, a perspective that often unveils an elitist tilt in educational policies. Notably, these policies tend to amplify the voices of power holders within the education system, overshadowing and excluding the narratives of students from knowledge production and policy formulation (McGrath *et al.*, 2020). To rectify this imbalance, the current chapter embraces the narratives of students, thereby enriching our comprehension of education.

More specifically, this chapter investigates the reasons behind students' preference for vocational education over academic education, factors shaping their choices, and their lived experiences within the context of Technical and Vocational Education and Training (TVET) institutions. These explorations will be organised around three core questions:

- Why do students choose vocational education over academic education?
- What factors inform students' choice of vocational education?
- What characterizes their experience within a TVET institution?

Each of these central inquiries will be further segmented into thematic clusters. This segmentation will facilitate a meticulous exploration and discussion of key findings, enabling an analytical synthesis with extant literature.

4.1 Theme 1: Students' Rationale for Preferring Vocational to Academic Education

In examining the preference of secondary level students for vocational education over academic education, a question that has been largely raised is why this choice appears to be so dominant. This investigation attempts to answer this question by delving into the perspectives of the students themselves, thereby offering a platform for their voices to be heard. Central to this examination is the exploration of the manner in which vocational education is socially constructed through the lens of current policy discourses.

Prevailing narratives in the realm of education are often shaped by economic imperatives, such as the necessity for economic growth and the promotion of education and skills development as

panaceas to societal and economic challenges. Consequently, these narratives wield significant influence on the social construction of vocational education, especially for students from less privileged backgrounds. This investigation aimed to gather insights from the lived experiences of these students and their interpretations of the policy discourses.

Several key reasons emerge from the research as to why students from underprivileged communities gravitate towards vocational education. Primarily, these students perceive vocational education as a conduit to acquiring practical skills that can lead to future employment opportunities. Moreover, many of these students have familial ties to individuals in vocational sectors, which fosters an early exposure and potential affinity towards vocational education. Finally, these students believe vocational education may provide a faster route to employment as compared to its academic counterpart.

The elucidation of these motivators behind the choices of these students substantiates the idea that their decisions are not arbitrary but rather informed and considered. Evidently, these students recognise the potential benefits and opportunities that vocational education can provide, further underlining the role of policy discourses in shaping student perception. In sum, this research illuminates the contributing factors behind the preference for vocational education, and in doing so, provides a basis for potential policy revisions to better support the needs and aspirations of these students.

4.1.1 Skill Acquisition: A Decisive Factor

In contrast to university programmes that often gravitate towards a theoretical knowledge framework (Ramaligela, 2021), Technical and Vocational Education and Training (TVET) colleges accentuate the acquisition of practical skills, aligning more closely with the specific needs of various industries. As per Lange *et al.*, (2020: 2), TVET institutions facilitate social inclusion by equipping individuals with industry-relevant skills, thereby enhancing their opportunities for employment and societal integration.

Out of 15 participants, four particularly extolled the practical skill development offered at TVET colleges, which they perceived as being directly beneficial to their specific fields:

"I preferred having a skill, a trade, I was in a Technical High school so going to a TVET college focused on the trade itself minus the languages... my aim was to get a skill, a skill I can use and I know I have it, aren't gonna take that away from me " Mthokozisi (21).

"... because I have always wanted to do Civil Engineering " Smangaliso (25).

"... because in TVET colleges we learn how to work, in secondary they don't teach you how to work they don't really focus on what you want to be" Zipokazi (24).

"Financial Economics and Accounting were the subjects I was commencing at school, it was a seamless transition" Leticia (20).

"Tourism has been my passion since high school, and I yearned to explore it further at TVET, with an aspiration to become a tour guide" Dikeledi.

These reflections underscore the perceived efficacy of TVET colleges in providing the practical skills and industry-specific knowledge necessary for successful employment. The TVET pathway was particularly attractive for students with prior technical education exposure, such as Mthokozisi, offering the opportunity to further refine their skills in line with their career aspirations.

Nevertheless, it is essential to engage with a broader discussion about skill provision. The reductionist 'skills discourse' tends to oversimplify the benefits of education, positing skill acquisition as the sole determinant of educational value (Balwanz, 2015: 56). This perspective neglects the multifaceted nature of "knowledge" and "learning," suggesting that a narrow focus on skill provision may not necessarily guarantee employability. The acquisition of skills does not automatically equate to their workplace value, indicating that while TVET colleges indeed equip students with industry-specific skills, it does not ensure job acquisition.

In light of the above findings, this study corroborates the observations of Ramaligela (2021) regarding the practical orientation of TVET programmes, but also echoes Balwanz's (2015: 56) caution against overly simplistic 'skills discourse'. The choice of TVET colleges over universities, therefore, is influenced by the perceived benefit of skills acquisition but needs to be understood within the broader context of knowledge, learning, and the diverse expectations of the job market.

4.1.1.1 University-TVET Collaboration: The Way Forward?

The value of Technical and Vocational Education and Training (TVET) colleges' practical skill provision is well-established from the previous section, which in turn enhances social inclusion. However, it is equally crucial to recognise that skills alone do not necessarily guarantee job opportunities, thus signifying the essential role of holistic education incorporating both knowledge and learning (Tekkol and Demirrel, 2018: 3).

Universities, in contrast to TVET colleges, tend to offer comprehensive education, facilitating the development of critical thinking and problem-solving abilities—essential skills for any occupation. Tekkol and Demirrel (2018: 3) refer to this as self-directed learning, wherein students who identify themselves as self-directed learners exhibit "openness" (Oddi, 1984). Universities also house modern facilities and resources, offering students an array of specialisations and courses to develop a comprehensive understanding of their chosen field.

From this perspective, universities and TVET colleges serve complementary roles, providing unique sets of skills and knowledge essential for job readiness. A collaboration between these two institutions can potentially enhance the educational landscape, blending theoretical knowledge and practical skills. One can imagine an education system fortified by:

A Memorandum of Understanding (MOU) to formalise collaboration between universities and TVET colleges.

- A joint curriculum, enabling students to acquire both theoretical knowledge and practical skills.
- Joint internships facilitating practical experience in both academic and technical fields.
- A dual credit system enabling students to earn credits from both institutions.
- Joint student mentorship programs to assist students in transitioning between these educational institutions.

Three students voiced their support for such collaboration:

"An amalgamation of theoretical knowledge from universities and practical skills from TVET could provide a more holistic education experience..." Zipokazi (24).

"The dual credit system would be beneficial, ensuring we aren't just schooled but educated..." Karabo (22).

"In a rapidly evolving job market, joint internships would provide a much-needed industry exposure across diverse sectors..." Kopano (20).

It is essential to reiterate the significance of TVET institutions beyond skill provision. They empower students to actively contribute to their respective fields upon graduation, equipping them with essential tools for personal and professional growth. A wider recognition and emphasis on vocational education could potentially foster economic development by encouraging more individuals to pursue career paths aligned with their skills and interests (Tekkol and Demirrel, 2018: 10). Moreover, the educational system plays a vital role in encouraging vocational education. Schools should furnish students with comprehensive information about various post-secondary education options, enabling well-informed decisions.

Conclusively, while TVET colleges are critical for developing job-specific skills, an exclusive focus on skills may limit the overall education experience. Acknowledging the value of holistic education in policy discussions could lead to a more comprehensive approach to educational attainment, with greater emphasis on knowledge, learning, and skill development. The insights from this study reinforce Tekkol and Demirrel's (2018: 3) notion of self-directed learning but extend it further by proposing a symbiotic collaboration between universities and TVET colleges.

4.1.2 Similar fields with family and close people

Family also plays a role in one's decision making and academic success. Studies have shown that students with family members who are highly educated have an advantage over those without such familial support (Koçak *et al.*, 2021: 2). The presence of a family member with a higher education can help students by providing guidance, resources, and encouragement. Furthermore, students with family members who actively support their academic pursuits are more likely to succeed in their studies than those without such support.

In this study, the influence of family members and peers from similar fields on student choices was evident. It was observed that participants who hailed from families valuing Technical and Vocational Education and Training (TVET) colleges were significantly more inclined to enroll in

TVET colleges. This inclination was immediate and apparent among five out of the total 15 participants. The study highlighted various responses, such as:

“..People around me, even my stepfather, have a skill; everyone around me is from the same field. At school, there was a teacher who used to mention it in his classes, and I asked him questions; he explained the difference between the two..” Mthokozisi's (21).

“My brother recommended them to me. He thought that maybe I will do better in college..” Katiso (21).

“ I am doing carpentry and roof because my uncle is a builder...I wanted to join him for so long so I decided to do civil so that when I'm done I can join him...” Smangaliso (25). When furthermore, asked how he learned about vocational education, he said: *“From my cousin.. ”*

“ It was my father's idea... He recommended I go there for the sake of age. My age was not matching along with the grade I was attending at that time” Katlego (24).

“ Yeah,.. My sister neh...She was doing this subjects and got the job!” Kulani (23).

The implication of these student responses is that family members and people around them have a strong influence on student choices. Mthokozisi was influenced by the people around him and the teacher who explained the difference between the two. Smangaliso was influenced by his uncle and cousin, while Katlego was influenced by his father's recommendation to attend a school that was more appropriate for their age, as they were too old for the grade they were in. Finally, Kulani was inspired by his sister's success in the field.

The tendency of students to choose vocational education based on the influence of their family members is consistent with the idea of “social learning”; that individuals learn behaviours and values through observation and imitation of others, especially those close to them (Nabavi, 2012; 5). According to Driscoll (1994), learning is a “persisting change in human performance or performance potential as a result of the learner’s interaction with the environment” (p. 8-9). This is especially true of adolescents, who are more likely to be influenced by those closest to them. The family unit is a major factor in the development of a child, as they are exposed to their family's values and expectations. Therefore, adolescents rely heavily on the advice of their family members, making them more likely to pursue vocational education.

Similarly, this concept can be interpreted in the context of “cultural capital”, which refers to the knowledge and skills that are valued in a particular culture, and which can be passed down from generation to generation (Farias, 2014: 27). This concept suggests that students may be more likely to pursue vocational education if they have family members with similar skills, as this indicates that their family has a history of valuing vocational education. This was supported by a study conducted by the Organisation for Economic Co-operation and Development (OECD) (2018) which found that family occupational background plays a significant role in determining student’s educational aspirations. This is due to the fact that students are exposed to certain types of social networks that provide them with information and resources that shape their educational choices. Moreover, family members may also provide financial and emotional support.

Finally, this research finding can be interpreted as an example of "status maintenance," which refers to the desire of individuals to maintain their social standing or position in society (Reisel, 2011). The status maintenance thesis holds that " young people aspire to reach at least the social status position of their parents, and therefore the perceived benefits of further educational attainment will vary with family background " (Reisel, 2011: 263). This suggests that students may be more likely to choose vocational education if their family members have similar skills (position), as this will help them to maintain their social status. As shown in Mthokozisi's response above, his pride in sharing a skill with his family and his commitment to pursuing his dreams along that path are evident. This thesis can help elucidate some of the variations in perceived benefits of educational attainment among different socioeconomic status groups, as evidenced by research from Hansen (1997), Jonsson and Erikson (2007).

However, while families and members in the community may play a role in encouraging students to pursue vocational education, it is ultimately the student's decision to enroll in a TVET college. Every student is an individual with their own interests, skills, and motivations, and they should not be limited by their family's expectations or the expectations of those around them. Ultimately, students should be allowed to explore their interests and pursue the education path of their choice (Desforges & Abouchaar, 2003; Hill & Chao, 2009; Toren, 2013). Hence, this study argues that family members and people in the community need be careful not to pressure students into pursuing a particular career path. This might lead to students feeling overwhelmed or inadequate if they are not able to meet the expectations placed on them. It is vital to remember that every

student is different, and each student should be encouraged to pursue their own educational goals without any external pressure.

Finally, the role of the educational system in encouraging students to pursue vocational education is vital. Schools should be providing students with quality information and resources about the different types of post-secondary education available. This will ensure that students are well-informed and have access to the best resources to make the decision that is right for them.

Overall, this research finding implies that students may be more likely to choose vocational education over academic education if they have family members in similar fields. This is consistent with the ideas of social learning, cultural capital, and status maintenance, which suggest that students may be more likely to pursue vocational education if it is seen to be valued in their family and community. While family members and people in the community may play a role in encouraging students to pursue vocational education, it is ultimately the student's decision to enroll in a TVET college. It is important to provide students with the resources and information needed to make an informed decision, and to avoid pressuring them into a particular career path.

4.1.3 Rapid Transition to Employment: Perception versus Reality

Robinson and Meredith's (2013) assertion that students tend to prefer immediate employment to continued education, especially when facing financial strain, finds resonance in this study. The assumption that vocational qualifications may offer a faster track to the job market over academic degrees has resulted in many students choosing vocational education. This sentiment was shared by the majority of the study participants who expressed confidence and hope in securing employment after acquiring their National Curriculum (Vocational) NC(V) qualifications (12 out of 15 participants).

Most participants associated their potential employment with their chosen subjects, personal attributes, or the level of interest in their field. Others indicated having family connections to businesses related to their training, viewing their job prospects as relatively straightforward. Some comments include:

"Yes. As I said that my uncle is a builder, so I think it is going to be simple for me since he is always on site." Smangaliso (25).

"Yes, I think I am passionate enough, My C.V is not that bad" Mthokozisi (21).

"Yes, they give you a chance to study for auditing after level 4" Leticia (20).

"Yes, I am a fast learner. And a hard worker" Katlego (24).

"Yes, because I am effective you know.. and punctual when coming to working in an office and working around computers, typing and all that" Katiso (21).

"Yes, I think so, and I also think I am likely to create jobs" Kopano (20).

These responses reflect a growing trend wherein students opt for vocational education over academic education, possibly due to the perceived direct application of TVET qualifications to the job market (Department of Higher Education and Training, 2019: 6). It supports the notion that vocational qualifications provide job-specific skills and knowledge, which hold allure for those looking to enter the job market swiftly.

However, while this perception broadly holds true, it should be scrutinised further. Many variables, such as personal interests, family expectations, and financial considerations, contribute to the decision-making process in choosing a vocational education path. The quest for speedy employment post-acquisition of a TVET qualification should not overshadow the quality of training and real job opportunities.

Moreover, opting for vocational education does not necessarily guarantee successful employment (Buthelezi, 2018). Issues such as the industry's lack of acceptance of the NC(V) qualifications have led to a decline in trust in the skills taught at TVET colleges, subsequently affecting employability and exacerbating unemployment (p.15). This observation underscores the need for a holistic understanding of vocational education's perceived utility and actual outcome, recognising the complexity of factors influencing students' choices and experiences within this educational path. The findings, thus, offer both confirmation and a challenge to Robinson and Meredith's (2013) assertion, necessitating a nuanced understanding of the relationship between TVET education and employment prospects.

Vocational education is often seen as a viable alternative to academic education, as it is perceived to lead to faster employment. However, this is not necessarily the case. The revitalisation of

Technical and Vocational Education and Training (TVET) colleges in South Africa has led to many policy changes, including the introduction of the National Curriculum Vocational (NCV). This curriculum was intended to be relevant to the needs of the economy, as the country was experiencing a shortage of artisans (Mateus *et al.*, 2014; Buthelezi 2016: 9). However, the NCV curriculum has been plagued by a myriad of challenges, such as failure to achieve artisan development at an expected rate. This is due to a number of factors, such as the NCV course taking three years to complete, which is much longer than the trimester system of the old NATED courses. This has led to tension between lecturers who work in colleges that are responsive to labour markets, and those who focus solely on the NCV (Buthelezi, 2018: 8).

Furthermore, the NCV curriculum has been unpopular with industries, which are the potential employers of TVET college graduates (Rogers, 2003). This is due to a lack of familiarity with the new programme and scepticism to the type of human capital that it would yield, leading to a loss of confidence in skills training provided by TVET colleges. This has resulted in both curricula being officially run concurrently in the TVET colleges. Therefore, the choice of vocational education over academic education is not necessarily a guarantee of successful employment, and NCV would not lead to employment faster (Buthelezi, 2018: 8).

Elias (1939: 436) and Buthelezi (2018) previously asserted that in order to ensure continuity, the ‘new and the existing’ need to complement each other. Meaning that revamping vocational education needs to be consistent with the existing values, past experiences and needs of potential receivers of the product, and with society. This is potentially the only way to ensure that vocational education is successful in leading to employment. Vocational education is not yet being revamped to ensure continuity with existing values, past experiences, and needs of potential receivers of the product, and with society. This is because there is a lack of understanding of the importance of revamping vocational education to ensure successful employment. Without this understanding, vocational education is not being used to its full potential to lead to successful employment.

Participants generally, reflect that students are smart enough though, to have figured out that TVET opens quickly the door to the workplace. In a neo-liberal context, this to say that TVET is lucrative, the market responds better to those who have craft and practical skills; which is to say that the Dewey’s (Defalco, 2016) concept of “learning for earning” is still prevalent in vocational

education (p. 58). This is concerning however, as it suggests that education is being driven by the need for economic growth and profit, rather than focusing on the individualism and personal development of students. It can lead to a stratified society and inequality in educational opportunities, as the curriculum is tailored to suit the needs of capitalist businesses rather than the students themselves.

In conclusion, it is evident that students prefer vocational education over academic education due to the perceived promise of employment and opportunities associated with it. The promise of immediate employment upon completion of a TVET qualification is a major draw for those looking to enter the job market quickly. However, the quality of the training, the availability of job opportunities, and the wider socio-economic context should also be taken into consideration. Additionally, the research shows that the concept of "learning for earning" is still prevalent in vocational education, which can lead to unequal educational opportunities for students due to capitalist business interests dictating educational policy. Thus, more research is needed to better understand the motivations behind this trend, and to ensure that the best possible educational opportunities are available for all.

4.2 Theme 2: Influential Factors in Opting for Vocational Education Over Academic Education

The preceding theme endeavoured to address a significant knowledge gap by examining the motivations and potential outcomes arising from the decision to pursue a TVET qualification. This exploration shed light on the multifaceted nature of the decision-making process and its various implications. Building upon this understanding, the current theme delves into the specific determinants that sway students towards vocational education rather than academic education. The key findings extracted from the data that shaped this decision-making process fall under three categories: 1) the envisioned future professional path, 2) lack of knowledge leading to haphazard choices, and 3) challenges encountered in secondary schools. These factors form the core of this discussion and facilitate a deeper comprehension of the complexities at play in students' vocational education selection.

4.2.1 The kind of work students envisage

Since, Vocational education (TVET College) is a form of education that is designed to provide individuals with practical skills and knowledge that can be applied in the world of work. This type of education has been found to be beneficial for individuals who are preparing for the job market, (Defalco, 2016). When surveyed, most respondents ten (out of 15) indicated that the subjects they had registered for corresponded to the type of work they envisaged for themselves. For instance, participants said the following:

‘I chose Mechanical subjects, fitting and turning. for learnership, I understand the whole process, going to get a job and all that.’ Mthokozisi (21)

“ I was doing ODP, office practice... I envision Office admin, ..serving people” Kulani (23)

“I am doing Tourism management. because I want to travel” Karabo (22)

“Business entrepreneurship. such subjects encourage us to start our own business and be entrepreneurs. I also think I am likely to create jobs” Kopano (20)

“ I am doing tourism... I want Tour guiding, managing at a hotel or air hostess” Zintle (22)

“ I am doing Tourism , I want to be a Tourism operator, tour guide” Dikeledi (21)

“ I am doing Office admin..I envision doing Computer and paperwork” Zipokazi (24)

“ I discovered that I like traveling. so, traveling and tourism is my best choice. If I pass this NC(V), I will further my studies in Tourism Management” Nandipha (23)

“ I am doing tourism, .I envision Tour guiding, managing at a hotel, airhostess” Zintle (22)

“ I am doing Tourism subjects. I was doing CAPS at school so at least now I am doing Computer and ELU. Travelling, I want to do travelling more” Mbali (20)

This survey provides evidence that most respondents (10 out of 15) have chosen subjects that correspond to the type of work they envisage for themselves. This suggests that the respondents possess a clear understanding of the type of work they wish to pursue and have selected their subjects accordingly. This is a positive indication, as it implies that the respondents have invested time in researching and deliberating their options before making decisions. However, it is also

important to note that the survey does not offer insight into the quality of the subjects chosen or the level of commitment the respondents have toward their selected subjects. It is possible that the respondents may lack the necessary skills or knowledge to succeed in their chosen fields, or they may not be sufficiently motivated to complete their studies. Therefore, it is crucial to ensure that the respondents are adequately prepared and supported to enable them to achieve their goals.

Consequently, most of these respondents reported that they enjoyed the subjects they were registered for, while a smaller portion admitted to selecting those subjects due to a lack of alternative options. For example, Ntsako chose Tourism because she could not find space for the subject she wanted to pursue, which is Public Administration. Similarly, Katlego wanted to attain a Level 4 certificate and is still in the process of finding a career path that he desires.

This analysis reveals that most students enjoyed the subjects they were registered for, while a smaller portion had to settle for alternatives due to limited options. This suggests that some students may not have had ample opportunity to explore their interests and passions thoroughly, and instead had to choose from available subjects. This limitation could stem from various factors such as resource constraints, lack of guidance, or insufficient awareness of available options. Additionally, the fact that some students are still in the process of determining their career paths indicates a potential lack of deep exploration into their interests. This situation may adversely affect their academic performance and future career trajectories.

In general, it seems that students pursuing vocational education have a clear understanding of their future career paths and tend to select subjects directly relevant to their desired job roles. They are often motivated by the practical skills and knowledge gained through vocational training, which they perceive as more applicable to their career goals compared to academic education. This observation underscores the importance of guiding students to consider their career aspirations and make informed decisions about their secondary education. However, it's crucial to recognise that individual experiences and motivations may vary among students, and not all students may have such clarity or alignment between their chosen subjects and career aspirations.

These reflects neo-liberalism, because it emphasises the practical skills that students need to be successful in the job market. It encourages students to focus solely on the specific skill set they need to pursue a desired job, while ignoring other educational pathways that could lead to success

(Tekkol and Demirrel, 2018: 3). Such as for instance, the creative arts, liberal arts, and technology-focused education. Creative arts, consist of graphic design and animation, which can open doors to creative job opportunities that may not have been considered initially. Liberal arts, such as philosophy and sociology, can provide students with the critical thinking and problem-solving skills necessary to be successful in many fields. Additionally, technology-focused education, such as coding and software engineering, can open a wide range of job opportunities in the tech industry. Each of these educational pathways can lead to success in a variety of fields and should not be ignored in favor of a singular job-focused approach.

Hence, this neo-liberal approach reinforces the idea that the only path to success is through a specific job and ignores the potential of less traditional forms of education, the marketplace is more responsive to skill craft and if this is the approach. Where does these position students who choose the path of academia?

This approach can lead to an overall decrease in the quality of education and a narrowing of the curriculum. One thing that seem to have not been considerably taken into account, is the point that was also made by Buthelezi (2018) that secondary school aged students are still in their adolescent stage, hence, many of them are still in the process of discovering themselves and where their strengths and weaknesses lies, some are struggling solely to strive in these TVETs because they are still young (p. 11). Hence, for students to be encouraged to focus too heavily on specific skill set specifically for a particular job is not enough. This can be furthermore problematic at a later stage if a student decides to or would like to a change career path, there is little to no opportunity of changing to another educational path except students will have to start over, a possible result of a total setback.

Moreover, this can lead to a lack of appreciation for the wider range of knowledge and skills necessary to succeed in the modern workplace, such as the ability to think critically, to problem-solve, to communicate effectively and to collaborate with others. Students may not be exposed to a range of potential career paths and opportunities, leading them to miss out on potential opportunities or to pursue careers which may not be suitable for them.

The follow section will explore the ways in which policy makers, educators, and employers work together to empower students to make the best choices for their own learning and career paths. To

examine how the education system can be improved to better educate and inform students about the real purposes of vocational education, and how employers can recognise the value of the education a student has received.

4.2.2 Lack of knowledge, making random choices

It was quite impressive to note that majority of respondents understood the kind of work they envisage with the kind of subjects they had registered with. Although, as much as the choice of vocational education can be informed by the kind of work that individuals envision, it is concerning to realise that some student's choices lack the knowledge and guidance needed to pursue a career path with their NC(V) qualifications.

This lack of information was reflected in the responses of the four participants expressing an interest in becoming "*flight attendant*" and "*air hostess*" with a tourism qualification. This proved that these students were misguided because the job of a flight attendant or airhostess has less to do with tourism qualifications and more to do with customer service skills, with airlines providing training to successful applicants for the necessary skills (Decaldo, 2016).

To analyse this situation, we can use the Theory of Planned Behaviour (TPB) developed by Icek Ajzen (Ajzen, 1991). This theory suggests that behaviour is determined by three factors: attitude, subjective norms, and perceived behavioral control.

Attitude refers to the individual's evaluation of the behaviour in question (p.188). In this case, the attitude of participants towards becoming a flight attendant or airhostess is likely to be positive, as they have expressed an interest in the job. However, their attitude may be misguided, as they believe that a tourism qualification is necessary for the job, when in fact customer service skills are more important.

Secondly, subjective norms which refer to the individual's perception of what is expected of them by others (p. 188). In this case, the four participants may be influenced by their peers and family members in their social circle. These people may be giving them incorrect information about the job, leading them to believe that a tourism qualification is necessary.

Finally, the Perceived behavioral control which refers to the individual's perception of their ability to perform the behavior. In this case, the four participants may feel that they have the necessary

'control' to pursue the job (p. 188), as well as the necessary qualifications and skills to become a flight attendant or airhostess, as they have expressed an interest in it. However, they may not have the correct information about the job, leading them to believe that a tourism qualification is necessary. This could lead to them feeling that they do not have the necessary control to pursue the job.

Similarly, some students made their educational choice and opted for a TVET college but were unaware of their aims and purposes. This was picked up from the responses when participants were asked what they thought the aim of TVET colleges was; the following students sounded mentally blank, confused, and did not know the answer. Smangaliso (25) and Kulani (23) responded with a plain, "I don't know," while Katlego (24) said, "Okay, can we please skip this question," and Mbali (20) answered with an off-topic answer.

This response highlights the lack of knowledge and understanding that some students have when it comes to TVET colleges. It is possible that these students were not adequately informed about the aims and purposes of TVET colleges before making their educational choice. This lack of knowledge and understanding of the aims and purposes of TVET colleges is concerning. It suggests that these students may not have made an informed decision when choosing to attend a TVET college. It is possible that they were unaware of the potential benefits of attending a TVET college, such as the opportunity to gain technical and vocational skills that can lead to better job prospects. It is also possible that they were unaware of the potential drawbacks of attending a TVET college, such as the lack of access to higher education opportunities.

Furthermore, this situation can be analysed using the Social Cognitive Theory. According to this theory, people learn by observing others and then imitating their behavior (Decalido, 2016). In this case, students may have observed others making the decision to attend a TVET college and followed suit without understanding the purpose of the college. This lack of understanding could be due to a lack of guidance or information from parents, teachers, or other adults in their lives. Additionally, the students may not have had access to resources that could have helped them understand the purpose of TVET colleges. This lack of understanding could lead to a lack of motivation and engagement in their studies, which could lead to poor academic performance.

This lack of knowledge of TVET can be attributed to the lack of information available to prospective students. Which may imply that policies do not inform and teach students about the real purposes of vocational education, allowing them to better understand their options and explore different career paths. As Defalco (2016) states, students should be empowered to make the best choices for themselves and be able to change society 'from the bottom up'.

Educating students about the real purposes of TVET colleges appears to be a relatively new concept. For example, addressing students regarding who TVET colleges were initially meant for and why they were developed to accommodate the rest of the students has not been clearly communicated -; a scenario where an African child can find their position and their independence coupled with confidence to transform the society 'all the way up' as Defalco also articulates (Decaldo, 2016: 61). Consequently, for policies and colleges to successfully execute these, they will firstly have to dismantle the capitalist business interests dictating educational policy, where students receiving vocational education are not provided with equal opportunity.

The issue with educational policies that fail to adequately convey the true purpose of vocational education is that students may not acquire the skills and knowledge essential for success in the workplace. Lacking a clear understanding of the significance of vocational education, students may lack motivation to pursue careers in their chosen field or may not possess the requisite skills. Moreover, employers may not appreciate the value of the education received by students and may be hesitant to hire or retain them. Furthermore, without understanding the college's mission and objectives, individuals may struggle to identify the most suitable institution for their educational needs, potentially resulting in a subpar educational experience. It's important to acknowledge that individual circumstances and perspectives may vary, and not all students or employers may be affected in the same way by these challenges.

In conclusion, it is evident that there is a lack of knowledge and understanding of the aims and purposes of TVET colleges among some students. This lack of knowledge and understanding can be attributed to a lack of information and guidance from parents, teachers, and other adults in their lives. Additionally, educational policies do not appear to be informing and teaching students about the real purposes of vocational education, which could lead to a lack of motivation and engagement in their studies, as well as a lack of skills and knowledge necessary to succeed in the workplace. It

is therefore important that educational policies are revised to ensure that students are adequately informed and guided when making their educational choices. The following section unpack the various challenges faced by TVET Colleges, such as financial constraints, lack of resources, and lectures with non-engaging and negative attitudes, and how these challenges make it difficult for students to acquire the necessary skills and pass their studies. It will also discuss the suggested solutions to improve the quality of education in the colleges.

4.2.3 Challenges at secondary school level: TVET College to be an easy way out

The motivations of students who choose to pursue vocational education over academic education at the secondary school level in this study has revealed that the decision is often informed by a range of challenges, primarily related to academic performance constraints and peer pressure. Nine (out of 15) participants reported having encountered academic challenges in their secondary school and chose TVET college as an easier option. Karabo (22) and Zintle (22) both mentioned poor academic performance in their secondary school years as the reason for their decision to enrol in the TVET. Zipokazi, Nandipha, Katiso, Nonka, and Mbali all indicated that they had failed matric, while Kabelo and Smangaliso said they 'did not qualify for University'. Nandipha further stated that she did not do well in grade 11 and felt she did not qualify for university, *“so I wanted to start at TVET as NC(V) and do better, maybe I can go to University”*.

Peer pressure was also a factor in some participants' decisions, as Kabelo explained that his misbehaviour in high school resulted in him being unable to complete his secondary school education, so he decided to enroll in a TVET college and apply for a bursary. Karabo's comment that 'TVET is meant for people with lower academic performance, and university is for those with better results', implies that students view TVET as a less rigorous alternative to university. She said that he felt university was more challenging than college, and when asked if she would choose differently if given the chance, Karabo said she would prefer a law degree at university, if she had not failed her matric. Moreover, Kopano articulated the following:

“I feel most people that I know who went to university, most of them dropped out and then some of those who went to college few of them dropped out... Yes, I feel like university is more challenging”.

The question arises as to why students perceive TVET as the 'easier' route. It appears that the reputation of TVET as a 'second tier/second-class' institution is a result of the deficiencies that institutions themselves are experiencing and the poor public image associated with them (Tlapanana and Myeki, 2020). This has led to students viewing their educational experience from a deficiency lens, and thus perceiving TVET as an easy option, since they can quickly and easily pass through it. This is evidenced by Zintle's statement, when she suggested that 'TVET is for those who did not complete matric, as it provides practical and theory based learning, allowing them to complete a course without the need for matric', and Dikeledi's statement, when she said that "TVETs are much easier...vocational education will have a future in SA if they get more recognition, they should be treated equally like universities".

Furthermore, it may be perceived that TVET courses are easier to attain a qualification due to their quicker completion and cost-effectiveness as the literature have stated. This is true for some Nated courses that can be completed within six months, but not for an NC(V) qualification, which is a year-long qualification equivalent to secondary school (Grade 10, 11, and 12). The entry level for TVET colleges is lower than universities, as they accept students who have passed Grade 9, 10, 11, instead of a standardised mark, which opens doors for lower performing students (Nethononda, 2022). However, the content of the course is often equivalent to secondary school, as it is made up of the same subjects such as Mathematics, English, Life orientation, and Home Language with two to three vocational subjects (Department of Higher Education and Training (DHET), 2020).

As a result, students may struggle to keep up with the academic expectations of the course, due to a lack of support and human resources. Zungu of the South African College Principals Organisation (SACPO) further highlights that "there is a misalignment in the system because of the strong academic expectations at colleges" (Pretorius, 2018). Financial assistance is often prioritised over academic support, leading to a decrease in the pass rates at TVET colleges, as students are "not ready" when they get to college (Pretorius, 2018). Thus, to improve the success of students in TVET courses, an emphasis must be placed on academic support services.

All these reflects the effects of inequality and power dynamics. The idea of TVET being seen as a 'second tier' institution replicates the power dynamics in society, the way in which people are judged based on their educational backgrounds. Furthermore, the idea of TVET courses being seen

as an ‘easy option’ is also reflective of the power dynamics in society, as it implies that students who attend such institutions are seen as inferior to those who attend universities. Finally, TVET colleges offer a more accessible route to gaining the qualifications and skills necessary for employment compared to other education avenues. However, this accessibility is undermined by the lack of resources and support in many of these colleges (Hart, 2019: 2), leading to inequalities in access to education and hindering student success.

4.2.3.1 The power of perception

From this entire section, the situation of students who choose vocational education based on their experiences in secondary school and view TVET as an option, reveal a strong reflection of the power of perception. According to Fiske and Taylor (1991), perception consist of the selection, organisation, and interpretation of sensory information to form meaningful experiences. They use the term “salience” to explain that our prior experiences and the information we encounter can influence the way we think and the decisions we make as well as to note that when we come across new or conflicting information, it can alter our opinion of us as entities (p. 145).

From this point, it can be argued that perception is a powerful tool in the lives of students, evident in this study. It can lead them to make wise decisions, or it can lead them down the wrong path altogether. Firstly, the way students perceive things can be influenced by a variety of factors, such as their age, experiences, and surroundings. For instance, if a student perceives their school as a place to have fun and make friends, they are less likely to pay attention in class and more likely to engage in risky behaviors. Such as Kabelo (22) who was caught in peer pressure and adolescent stage in his secondary school days and resulted into misbehaviors which led him to end up dropping out before he considered to enroll with TVET College. As well as Khothatso (21) who was not taking his education seriously and not studying, then only after he failed, he had to reconsider is actions although it was a bit too late.

Secondly, if students perceive their school as a place to learn and advance their academic knowledge, they are more likely to focus on class and take their education seriously. Such as Smangaliso (25) who was encouraged to work hard at the TVET college he was enrolled in as it resonated with his goals and interest, “*learning while doing practicals*” and the vision he had of

holding high position in a reputable company nor starting his own. Finally, students can also be misled by their own perceptions of the world around them. They may rely heavily on the opinions of other people, or the messages in popular culture, rather than on their own experiences or research. Such as the situation discussed earlier in this theme, where students choose vocational education because they perceive TVET colleges to be easier to pursue than the route of university. The following section will explore on this narrative following.

4.2.3.2 Is TVET College an 'Easier' route than University?

The White Paper (RSA, 2013: 12) for the TVET Colleges outlined the vision of providing young school leavers and those who wish to complete their schooling or desire to go to vocational training, knowledge and attitudes necessary for employment in the labour market. However, the study of Buthelezi (2018) revealed that the belief that TVET Colleges offer an easier alternative to traditional academic institutions is a myopia misconception. This was evidenced by the participants' reports of several challenges that make TVET college and courses as challenging, if not more so, than traditional academic institutions. These include lack of resources within the TVET institution, such as computers, data, libraries, furniture, and printers and overall equipment for vocational training (p.12). Furthermore, four out of fifteen participants reported that lack of resources within the TVET institution they were attending was a significant challenge in pursuing their studies. This was further highlighted by Zintle (22) and Katlego (24) who spoke of the lack of amenities such as computers, data, libraries, sports centers, and student cards. Thus, TVET Colleges are facing several challenges that make them as challenging, if not more so, than traditional academic institutions.

Participants have highlighted that lectures with a non-engaging, negative attitude can be a contributing factor to the difficulty of studying in TVET colleges. It is now an issue of the government and educational authorities to take action to ensure that TVET colleges have the necessary resources and that lecturers receive the proper training to engage with their students in a positive way. Zintle (22) said some lectures “would just stand there, read a book then that’s it”, while Mbali (20) mentioned that “when students have a problem about the lecturer, they have bad attitude towards the learners”. Although some respondents acknowledged that there were good lectures, they nevertheless voiced concerns about the behaviour of lecturers towards students.

Additionally, delays in funding and red tape were identified as major issues when it comes to Vocational Education.

“Some students complain about bursaries” Karabo (22)

“The only thing that I am concerned about is that a lot of my money is not there which means they only funded my books and the school but not me.” Leticia (20)

“I don’t get any data, its money. I don’t get any funds” Kulani (23)

“NSFAS...Sometimes it funds us sometimes it doesn’t” Smangaliso (25).

The red-tapes criteria set to get the funding include student achieving 80% marks in the respective subjects and/or 80% class attendance. Respondent said:

“I apply expecting to be funded in February, but the feedback was that I must have 80% and more to get the funding,

I was troubled that they expect students to have an 80% attendance, which is hard for students to reach because some of us have parents who are not working right, so it’s hard for them to reach an 80 percent attendance, where?” Kabelo (21)

All these reflects the impact of inadequate resources, negative attitudes of lecturers and financial constraints on students’ success in their TVET education. Validating the point made by Nxumalo (2008), Harley & Wedekind (2004, 206) and Oakes (2001) that lack of resources is a ‘multifaceted problem’ in South African which is now an issue in the education system due to its replication. Consequently, reflecting the theory of Vygotsky (1978) that the environment has a significant impact on learning and development, as the lack of resources and negative attitudes of lecturers create an unfavorable learning environment. Thus, suggesting the environment should provide meaningful and stimulating experiences for students to reach their full potential.

In conclusion, it is evident that the notion that TVET Colleges are easy is a misconception. The finding that poor academic performance is the primary reason for students to choose vocational education (TVET) is an important one, but it does not mean that TVET college is in any way easy. In fact, this suggests that students may be deliberately choosing a different type of learning to best

suit their needs and abilities. The challenges faced by TVET Colleges, such as financial constraints, lack of resources, and lectures with non-engaging and negative attitudes, make it difficult for students to acquire the necessary skills and pass their studies. Amongst many suggested solutions, it is therefore important to ensure that TVET Colleges are adequately resourced and that lecturers are held accountable for their behaviour towards students, to improve the quality of education in the colleges.

4.3 Theme 3: Learners Experiences: The Role of TVET Colleges in Shaping the Perceptions of Vocational Education Amongst Students

From the previous theme, TVET Colleges are not easy, but rather provide students with an alternative form of education that they find more suitable for their needs and abilities. With the right support, students can be provided with the best possible learning environment and resources to ensure that they can reach their full potential. In that case, this theme focuses on how participants construct vocational TVET colleges as a social space, basically how it feels like to be in a TVET college. Their understanding of vocational education in comparison to remaining in traditional secondary school versus taking the route of university. Thus, through unpacking how these students construct their reality and their understanding of vocational education at TVET colleges, this theme seeks to gain insights into what the college offers and how it is perceived.

4.3.1 Perceiving TVET College as a Social Refuge

An extensive analysis of the data regarding the TVET college as a social space paint an intriguing picture. A significant majority of students (12 out of the 15 participants), who either failed, dropped out, or underperformed in their secondary schools, expressed satisfaction with their enrollment in TVET institutions. The following quotes illuminate this sentiment:

"I am happy with my choice of institution... If I were to choose again, I would make the choice for vocational education; it is more comfortable for me" Smangaliso (25)

"I am happy... so far, everything is currently working; it is a comfortable space" Kopano (20)

"I'm so happy... when you don't qualify for the final, they give us a chance to meet them halfway so we can attend and appear in examinations" Leticia (20)

"Yes, I am happy... because that college gives quality education, and it is professional"
Katlego (24)

Contrastingly, three students expressed dissatisfaction with their enrolment at TVET, indicating a preference for universities:

"So far, I'm not happy... I did not have a choice, that's why I go to TVET college to give me a second opportunity; the university did not" Ntsako (24)

"I left school in grade 9... Well, I think ever since I have been in this college, I can become somebody in life... but well... if I were to choose, I would go for the university. Maybe if my situation was different" Kabelo (22)

This disparity of perceptions unveils an insightful perspective on how TVET colleges are viewed by students: as a haven for second opportunities. The majority see TVET as a viable, and often favourable, option for those who experienced setbacks in their secondary school education. This sentiment aligns with a considerable body of research. Powell and McGrath (2018) and Farias (2014) both highlighted the potential for TVET to serve as a conduit to education for those from disadvantaged backgrounds or those who dropped out of school.

Particularly relevant is the case of the National Certificate Vocational NC(V), which caters to individuals with less impressive academic performance and offers them a trajectory to advance their education and attain valuable qualifications (Balwanz, 2015). This observation is substantial as it implies that TVET colleges provide a sanctuary for individuals who might face barriers to higher education, presenting them with opportunities to acquire employable skills and knowledge.

Social capital is a concept that has been used to explain the relationships between individuals and their social networks. As previously explained in chapter 3 of this study, it is defined as the resources that are available to individuals through their social networks, such as access to information, resources, and support. The role of social capital in TVET can be seen in how students use their social networks to access resources, knowledge, and opportunities available through TVET institutions (Claridge, 2018). By understanding the role of social capital in TVET, we can gain insight into how students perceive and interact with their peers and teachers, and how this affects their learning outcomes (p. 5). This is evident in the responses of the students who are

happy to enrol in TVET institutions, as they can access resources, knowledge, and opportunities that they may not have been able to access in other educational institutions. This means that TVET institutions provide a space for students to access resources, knowledge, and opportunities that they may have not been able to access in other educational institutions.

On the other hand, an analysis of participant statements using social capital theory revealed that students were discontented with having to enroll in a TVET College due to limited alternatives. While they recognise the potential benefit of TVET in helping them become “somebody in life”, they would have preferred to pursue college at university, as it would have been more prestigious and perhaps increased their social capital. In addition, it appears that lack of resources created barriers for these students in terms of completing high school, which left them with limited options. This demonstrates the importance of providing resources and opportunities for people to access higher education, to reduce the risk of them being excluded from higher levels of social capital.

Moreover, Farias (2014) pointed out that while high-performing students often qualify to proceed to university, there is a subset of these students who end up at Technical and Vocational Education and Training (TVET) Colleges. This was also evident in this study, such as Kabelo who was fairly a good performing student (scoring 60 to 70 percent) who was not keen to enroll for TVET, but his circumstances led him there. As well as Katlego (24), who stated he was "performing well," the problem was that his age did not match the grade he was attending at that time; he was already 20 years old in Grade 10 when his father suggested he should go to a TVET college.

This could mean that TVET colleges are increasingly becoming a space for students who are not able to access University due to their background circumstances. This means that TVET colleges are becoming a viable option for students who may not have the same opportunities as those who are able to attend university. Furthermore, it is evident that students may face issues in their personal lives that can hinder their progress and force them to look for other alternatives, such as TVET. This decision-making process can be especially disconcerting for high-performance, low-income students with high academic expectations (Farias, 2014: 3-4). The implication of this is that students from low-income backgrounds may be more likely to pursue a TVET program instead of a traditional academic route due to the financial and personal pressures they face. This could lead to a lack of access to higher education and a lack of opportunity for these students.

It appears many students do not necessarily view TVET College as a social space. While some participants (4 out of 15) gave a positive view of TVET College as a place to improve their skills, many of the other students interviewed may not view it as a place they could socialise or interact with their peers. Such as Kulani who adds that: ‘there is no relations at TVET College’. This could be due to a variety of factors, such as the fact that TVET College is often seen as a less prestigious option than higher education, or it could be since the courses may be more focused on practical skills than on social interaction.

Overall, this section suggests that while students may view TVET colleges as a place of second chances, they may not necessarily view them as a social space. This could have implications for how TVET colleges are designed and structured, as well as how students are supported in developing relationships and making connections with peers. It is therefore vital for TVET colleges to ensure that they provide an environment that is conducive to social interaction and that encourages students to connect with one another. This could involve restructuring the college or providing additional support to students to help them develop relationships with their peers.

4.3.2 TVET experience compared to Secondary school

Since, TVET (Technical and Vocational Education and Training) students experience a different education system compared to secondary school students. They usually undertake hands-on learning in a workshop, laboratory or simulated environment. While secondary school students, on the other hand, typically receive a more theoretical education that prepares them for further studies at a tertiary level Farias (2014). Participants expressed a preference for TVET colleges over secondary schools, due to their belief that it provides a secondary school alternative coupled with a tertiary feel.

Their views suggest that there are differences between Technical and Vocational Education and Training (TVET) schools and secondary schools. These differences are seen in various aspects such as firstly, the experience-; the hands-on experience in their field of study, while secondary schools tend to be more focused on theoretical knowledge. Students believe that TVET colleges offers more real life and experience knowledge than that of traditional secondary schools. Such as the following four participants:

“Secondary school doesn’t give good or enough knowledge about how the world works in an office environment. Things that as a person you need to know, in secondary they don’t give that information” Katlego (24)

“In TVET colleges we learn how to work, in Secondary they don’t teach you how to work they don’t really focus on what you want to be” Zipokazi (24)

“Yes, because I gain experience more than secondary, secondary school is focused on one specific thing instead of a wild range” Mthokozisi (21)

This is supported by Sephokgole and Makgato (2019) in their study when participants negatively perceived the typical classroom assessment, because they were unable to apply their learning to real-life situations.

Secondly, is the Method of teaching. Participants reflected that TVET schools may emphasise instruction that is more practical and task-oriented, while secondary schools tend to use a more academic approach. Such as, Zipokazi (24) who emphasised the appreciation of the opportunity to gain more “formal English” at TVET such as how to write emails, reports and other documents than what is provided in secondary schools, as this increase their chances of employment. Leticia (20) furthermore added that:

“.. because of work basis they teach us how to work unlike at school. At school, they teach us only a friendly English the one that we write, sort stories and at TVET they teach us English where we get to write emails, how to write reports and all that.”

“ In TVET most courses there are practical unlike at schools most things are theory so at TVET you get more experience of whatever you are doing” Kopano (20)

This preference for TVET colleges suggests that individuals value the practical skills and employability that these institutions provide, allowing them to pursue their economic and social goals. Thus, the preference for TVET colleges over secondary schools reflects a Neo-liberal emphasis on individual economic advancement.

Since, Neo-liberalism is an economic and political philosophy that emphasises the importance of individual economic advancement. It argues that individuals should be free to pursue their own economic goals, free from government intervention. In this way, it prioritises economic freedom and the power of the individual to make decisions and take risks in pursuit of economic success. This is reflected in the preference for TVET colleges over secondary schools, to prioritise individual economic advancement. Furthermore, the appreciation for formal English reflects the importance of language skills in the job market and suggests that individuals are aware of the need to be competitive to advance their economic prospects.

It appears TVET students are expected to be more independent and practical in their learning, as they are expected to develop the skills relevant to the trade they are studying. However, it is difficult to determine whether TVET students are ready to be more independent and practical since each person is different including their backgrounds and abilities. The Curriculum from that of secondary school appears to be quite different from that of TVET, which can make it difficult for TVET students to transfer their skills to other areas.

Curriculum in TVET studies is designed to provide students with the technical and professional skills necessary to pursue a specific career often done through hands-on, practical learning that focuses on the development of specific skills, such as welding or computer programming. This type of curriculum is typically much narrower in scope than that of a secondary school, which may include a variety of academic subjects in addition to career-specific skills. As such, TVET students may not learn the same range of knowledge and skills that secondary school students do, which can make it difficult for them to transfer their skills to other areas. For instance, a TVET student such as Mthokozisi (21) may have studied fitting and turning but may not have the same academic knowledge in the areas of mathematics or writing that a secondary school student would have. As a result, he might encounter difficulties if he attempts to enter a field that requires those skills, such as engineering or research. In this case, he would need to spend additional time and effort to develop the necessary skills, which may not be feasible. To address this challenge, it is important for TVET providers to ensure that their students are provided with the necessary knowledge and skills to pursue their desired field of career.

The curricula of the programs approved by the minister are rigid and constrictive in nature and in comparison, to universities, the defined autonomy of colleges is very restrictive (National Advisory Council on Innovation (NACI), 2021: 44). The disadvantage of a narrowly practical-based type of education reflects that TVET students may be at a competitive disadvantage when competing for jobs with candidates who have a more traditional education. Additionally, the lack of transferability of skills can limit the career opportunities available to TVET students. They may be unable to pursue certain types of jobs due to the lack of knowledge and skills they have acquired from their vocational training.

Another disadvantage of TVET is that it can be more expensive than other forms of education, The National Advisory Council on Innovation (NACI) (2021) asserted that, technological infrastructure is expensive hence colleges should be resourced accordingly for maximum effectiveness (p 44). Students may have to pay for the cost of materials, tools, and equipment, as well as tuition fees, which can be a financial burden for some. Additionally, the quality of the education may not be as high as that offered by traditional secondary schools, which can lead to students not being adequately prepared for the job market. Furthermore, the courses may not be as comprehensive as those offered by other educational institutions, which can limit the career options available to TVET graduates.

Finally, the lack of recognition of TVET qualifications in certain countries can also be a disadvantage. This can make it difficult for students to find employment in certain parts of the world, as employers may not be willing to take a chance on someone with a qualification from a vocational training program. Additionally, even if a graduate can find employment, they may be at a disadvantage due to the lack of recognition of their qualifications. This can lead to them being paid lower wages than those with a more traditional education.

Overall, TVET students experience a different education system compared to secondary school students. While TVET students gain practical skills and knowledge to help them gain employment in their chosen field, secondary school students gain a more theoretical understanding of the topics they are studying. Both systems have their advantages and disadvantages, and it is important for students to choose the system that works best for them.

4.3.3 TVET institution versus University

This section is significant in understanding the motivations behind students' decisions to enrol in TVET colleges instead of universities. Participants expressed comfortability enrolling in a TVET college than in a university, citing the belief that university is more difficult to pursue. Students suggested that the primary difference between these two institutions is the intersection of several factors, including direct contact with students, teaching style, and the level of pressure. A few students believed that these two institutions are similar, citing freedom to choose, the offering of the same courses, and the perception that TVET colleges are often underestimated when compared to universities.

4.3.3.1 Direct contact with students

The literature has generally found that TVET colleges are viewed favorably for the personalised interactions they offer as compared to universities. Studies have found that students have a greater sense of trust in instructors at TVET colleges, as well as an appreciation for the direct knowledge of their educational background and previous experience that those instructors have Farias (2014). This is supported by the finding in this study that *“TVET college is the best because they know student backgrounds, University does not have direct contact with students”*, Karabo (21); as it reflects a positive view of the personalised interactions offered by TVET colleges. Kopano (20) added that: *“TVET is a comfortable space, and it is easy for us to question them, and it is easy for them to explain to us, they also allow us to take any after hours to call them after hours so that we can proceed”*.

This demonstrates that the respondent believes that TVET colleges have a distinct advantage over universities in the way they interact with their students. The respondent appears to be expressing the view that TVET colleges can better understand their students due to their direct contact with them and their knowledge of the student's backgrounds. However, it is important to note that this does not mean that universities are not capable of understanding their students, as universities can and do have direct contact with their students, such as through student services and faculty advisors (Ramaligela, 2021). Additionally, universities may have access to more resources and greater capacity to support students than TVET colleges, which could be beneficial to student experiences. Ultimately, it is difficult to draw a definitive conclusion about which type of institution is “better” for student experience, as it is highly dependent on the individual student's needs and expectations.

While the statement made by the respondent suggests that TVET colleges may be better suited to certain students, it is important to recognise that universities also offer unique advantages which could be beneficial to a student's experience.

4.3.3.2 Teaching style

The TVET teaching panache is a style of instruction that focuses on equipping students with the skills and knowledge to assist them work in a specific career field. The style traditionally involves a combination of theory and practical instruction, with a focus on hands-on learning. Students have a wide range of experiences with TVET teaching styles, depending on the programs they enrol in and the instructors they work with (Marope, Chakroun and Holmes, 2015: 11).

Participant who have experienced a TVET teaching style, reported that they find it beneficial because it allows them to gain real-world skills and knowledge that they can immediately apply in their chosen fields. Furthermore, students perceive the teaching style of TVET as more engaged and interactive than university-level teaching, which is often done mainly through lectures. Such as Leticia (20) who mentioned that university teaching is mostly done through messages and SMSs and that exams are often taken from home, while TVET teaching provides more opportunity for knowledge acquisition and interaction.

This is supported by other research which has found, as previously stated that, TVET often provides more hands-on and practical learning experiences than university (Brock, 2019). The study by (Ramaligela, 2021) has indicated that lecturers' classroom assessments do not reflect content validity or apply real-life experience and real-life context. However, lecturers can give them various assessment tasks which talks to lot of teaching happening at TVET colleges. Therefore, this research suggests that TVET teaching style is perceived by students as being more effective than university teaching and provides a more engaged learning experience.

4.3.3.3 Pressure

According to Buthelezi (2018: 10), during the process educational reform by government, there were unintended consequences that the majority of NC(V) students carry heavy subject loads. Since the NC(V) is a three-year qualification, offered at Levels 2, 3 and 4. Each level takes a full year of study, and a student is required to take 7 subjects for each level. A student must take three compulsory fundamental subjects, which are a language, Life Orientation and Mathematics or

Mathematical Literacy. Over and above this, a student takes four vocational subjects which can be chosen from Business, Engineering or General Studies. The load becomes heavy at Level 2 if the student did not pass all the subjects. The student must do seven subjects plus those that he or she is repeating.

This is evident in this study; TVET courses require more time to be devoted to coursework, thus resulting in a heavier assignment load. College, they give a lot of assignments and that's a lot of pressure... I feel like in university they give you a full year to complete, in college they give those six months with a lot of work." Mbali (20) also said, "We have to study a lot about this course, and since this Covid we cannot go to trips for tourism, so we attend extra classes."

This could be attributed to the fact that in college, students often take courses with a more intensive workload and more assignments than those in university. This finding can be seen as indicative of the heavier workloads expected of college students. It underscores the importance of time management and the need for students to be prepared for the demands of college.

Furthermore, this finding could also point to the need for colleges to provide additional resources to help students cope with the pressure of their assignments. This could include more one-on-one tutoring from professors or online resources to assist students with their coursework. Overall, the finding such as that of Nandipha demonstrate the importance of understanding the workload associated with college and being prepared to handle the additional assignments. It is important for students to be aware of the potential pressure of college assignments and to be well-equipped to manage their workloads accordingly. Moreover, colleges should consider the extra strain placed on students and provide additional resources to help them succeed.

4.3.3.4 Stigma of TVET Colleges

Karabo (20) suggested that people tend to overlook or rather “undermine” TVET colleges and focus mainly on universities, without recognizing the differences between the two. This sentiment is echoed in the findings of Buthelezi (2018), who showed that the NC(V) programme package offered at TVET colleges consists of only one language instead of two, and this is seen as unacceptable by universities compared to the common academic Grade 12. Katiso (21) added that universities offer more advanced qualifications and career choices than colleges, and that there are some things found in universities that cannot be found in colleges. These findings suggest that the

chances of producing more theoretically grounded TVET university graduates and future researchers in this critical sector are challenged.

This finding is of great importance for educational policies, as it highlights the need for more recognition of colleges and the need to provide students with more career choices in college. This could be done through expanding the courses available in colleges or increasing the access to university courses in college. Additionally, this finding consolidates that there is still a need to raise awareness of the differences between Colleges and Universities, so that people can make an informed decision when selecting a higher education option.

4.3.3.6 The Vision for Improving the TVET College System and Student Experience

Participants envisage a future where TVET colleges and education authorities have dismantled the inequalities that have been hindering students from progressing. Such as Mbali (20) who spoke of the need to improve the overall student experience by ensuring that “students are happy, and addressing any issues related to finance and lecturers with a bad attitude”. Furthermore, Smangaliso (25) highlighted the need for improved provision of laptops and the timely release of NSFAS funding. To further support student progression, respondents suggested that more subjects should be added to increase the range of options available and to add more activities within the subjects. Mbali also spoke of the need to improve tourism, to provide students with the opportunity to gain a wider worldview through field trips. Conversely, respondents were aware of the need for students to be patient with difficult subjects, to be dedicated and committed to progress. Overall, the participants of this study had a strong vision for improving the TVET college system and the student experience.

4.4 Conclusion

Pursuing one's career of choice can be fulfilling and exciting, but making choices under difficult circumstances or rather misguided can be a daunting journey. Students contend with educational policies that are elitists, yet making it seem like skill provision is the only ticket one needs to make it in the employment market while excluding the actual needs of students throughout the process. In this chapter, the aim was to explore the reasons why students choose vocational education over academic education and to show how student choice overlaps with TVET colleges

that are neoliberally characterised and operated. In support of Eichhorst (2015: 5) suggestion, individuals who opt for vocational education and training may have different abilities, tastes, and preferences regarding work than those who pursue an alternative form of education or no education at all. This study found that students often choose vocational education due to the skills that it provides, and majority is their desire to become employed more quickly (12 out of 15 participants). This allows students to gain real-world experience and develop their career skills. However, this also raises the issue of different occupations requiring different mixes of academic and practical skills. If people choose their occupation based on their skills, it can be difficult to effectively evaluate the different training and education systems since the employment patterns, payment structures, and union coverage in the occupations are not necessarily comparable.

Decision-making that was largely constructed and influenced by previous challenges, such as low academic performance, peer pressure and dropping out in traditional secondary schools, was central. Six out of fifteen participants indicated that their poor academic performance in secondary school was a challenge and informed their decision to enroll at the TVET College. They had either failed consecutively or underperformed in certain subjects and felt that they could no longer progress with academic education. Additionally, five participants indicated that they chose vocational education over university because they did not qualify to be accepted. Lastly, the challenge of peer pressure was mentioned, as misbehaviour in high school led to some participants dropping out and enrolling with TVET. Kabelo, as an example, indicated that he had some fair challenges in school and was still held back by peer pressure, which resulted in his aunt bringing him back home. He then chose to enroll at TVET as he could not be accepted at another high school due to his previous enrolment.

Students perceive TVET colleges to be a 'second tier' institution that is easier to pursue than a university. This perception is largely driven by the stigma that TVET colleges are not as good as universities, and this is a valid concern. As these misconceptions have the potential to lead students astray and ultimately keep them from achieving their goals because poor academic performance as the main reason for students to choose vocational education (TVET) does not equate to TVET colleges being easy. It is vital to note that TVET colleges can be just as challenging as traditional academic institutions. The type of learning environment, requirements, and expectations may differ, but they are equally rigorous.

Participants (4 out of 15) demonstrated that the lack of resources and funding in TVET colleges can be a hindrance and makes the pursuit of vocational education more difficult. Such as Zintle's (22) who expressed of the challenge of lack resources, access to technology in computer tourism operation classes. Despite promises from the year before, Zintle and her classmates had no access to computers or data, leaving them unable to practice or even send things online. This lack of access to technology has created an educational disparity among students, impeding their ability to gain the necessary skills for the computer tourism operation class. Katlego furthermore, thought there should be more amenities such as sports centers, libraries and student cards since his college did not even have a library.

Moreover, Mbali (20) expressed the lack of support from lecturers and the absence of clear guidance from the institution on how students should go about completing their studies can add to the challenge. Zintle also made a concession that some lectures were fine, however there were still other flaws such as lecturers not engaging with students or not providing sufficient explanation. Students are not heard when they have concerns.

This highlights the need for more guidance and support from lecturers and institutions to make TVET College a more accessible option for students. It is also important to understand that the difficulty of pursuing a TVET college course is not only a reflection of the quality of the institution but also the individual student's capacity to manage the course. From this analysis, TVET colleges are not necessarily 'second tier' institutions that are easier than universities. The lack of resources and guidance can make these colleges difficult to pursue. It is therefore important for institutions to provide more resources and support so that students can be better able to access and engage in.

CHAPTER 5: SUMMARY, CONCLUSION AND RECOMMENDATIONS

To this study, the basis in which students make choices for vocational TVET education instead of academic education is the belief that it serves their needs at the time, encroaching on the fact that the same choices are leaping through the effects of neo-liberal policies and practice. As a result, the student serves as a less empowered African child encouraged to walk through the door that seems like a complete success while there are more challenges in it and sometimes can turn out into a complete failure. Through the discussion of the results, it becomes evident that students are not necessarily naïve individuals (Dewey, 1938), as young as most of them are when they make their NC(V) educational choice, students are rational beings (in control of their decisions), as well as students are bounded by many other social, economic and cultural factors; it gets unfortunate when others are misguided in their career paths. This chapter concludes the study by summarising on the key findings emanated from the objectives and how they relate to the literature. The study will furthermore present the recommendations and limitations of this study and propose opportunities for future research.

5.1 Summary of key findings

Research for more complete and accurate understanding of students' choices for vocational education over academic education remained a relatively unexplored area; the basis in which they make decisions was still not clear (Gaffoor and Van der Bijl, 2019; Farias, 2014). Most studies focused on diverse methodological approach such as administering interviews to 8th graders (Powell and McGrath, 2013), 13 years of age in which decision making at this stage is strongly influenced by parents. Others focused on interviewing students who are dropouts, and these are mainly students who went to college for the main reason that they dropped out. As well as many more conceptual papers that executed no actual empirical study. Hence, for a more accurate information about students leaving their secondary schools for an equivalent NC(V) qualification at TVET College instead of proceeding with academic education, students who are above 18 years, with more years of experience and diverse reasoning needed more attention.

To address this gap for both theoretical and methodological process, the aim of this study was to analyse the basis and factors in which students make choices through the lens of social/educational policies and practice. Because they inform how vocational policy is structured and students' voices has not been fully located with regards to the discourse of vocational education.

From the research findings, it was evident that students choose vocational education for their aspirational reasons, such as to gain the skills required to find employment in the future, having family members in similar fields, and viewing it to achieve employment quicker than if they had chosen academic education. These reasons highlighted the importance of policy discourses in shaping how vocational education is perceived by students, as well as the concept of social learning, cultural capital, and status maintenance that may influence a student's decision. The promise of a job upon completion of their NC(V) qualification is often a major draw for those looking to enter the job market quickly, however this may not necessarily be the only factor influencing their decisions. These findings demonstrate the need for a more holistic approach to educational attainment, as well as the importance of considering the wider context when interpreting them.

Especially, the calibre of students such as NC(V)s who encounter challenges such as low academic performance and failing to complete their secondary schools, TVET contains a good capacity for students who are seeking for a 'second chance' and skills provision which sets as a foundation for students choosing TVET college (Balwanz, 2015). Students prefer TVET colleges due to the personalised interactions they offer, teaching style, and their belief that it provides a secondary school alternative coupled with a tertiary feel. In this study, TVET is characterised as a 'good institution' by its ability to offer NC(V) qualification that is equivalent to matric certificate, skills provision, teaching areas of professionalism such as Microsoft and how to write emails instead of general English taught in traditional schools.

Majority of respondents asserted that the TVET they registered with is a good institution also because of its educational advancement, facilities and the vocational focused subjects they always wanted to do. However, the lack of resources and the stigma attached to TVET colleges can be a disadvantage.

It is imperative, on the other hand, that students make choices because of the challenges they experienced from their traditional schools and perceive TVET College to be a way out. Their choices are based on their capabilities and cultural beliefs - attributed by their social surrounding (family, friends, socioeconomic status, school report, teachers influence etc.) and their proximity. Which is to say that students choose their career paths rationally but based on different preferences. Such as Kabelo (22), who chose vocational education due to circumstances at home and peer pressure that led him to drop out but wished to continue the traditional academic route and enrol to a university, as well as few participants who rather envisioned to enrol for university but chose vocational education because they failed in their secondary schools. McDonough (1999) asserted that culture proximity and network create bounds that may prevent students from appreciating the full range. Students already make choices under bounded rationality.

The most noteworthy point, which was also evident in diverse ways is that students are not well informed of the type of institution they are enrolled with and the full possibilities that comes with NC(V) qualification. This was characterised by the way some students enrolled at TVET but did not know nor understand the purpose of TVET College. Students, furthermore, study certain courses looking forward to career paths that are not necessarily related to what they are studying which could lead them towards career paths that students would not like and did not anticipate. There are so many diverse skills that students carry and not located in the right job placements due to the misinformation and poor decisions that students make from their early age. All this open a gap that the government and educational policies should closely reconsider and provide students with relevant support that they need or see if students are just being ignorant.

The future seems promising, however, as students are also keen to venture into entrepreneurship, complete their studies and furthermore create jobs for others as well. Nonka and Mthokozisi freed themselves by choosing vocational education for their “choice” regardless of their social surroundings. This is to show that the power of determination and decision-making lies with the individual as well. As Gramsci (1919) also asserts that, the power of mind and decision-making becomes legitimate to those that it is practiced.

5.2 Recommendations

To address the various kinds of inequalities addressed by participants such as lack of resources, funding delays, inadequate services and policies that are compromising and less known to students. I advocate for Critical Capability theoretical approach to be tested, to incorporate students' voices into vocational education both dialogue and decision making, developing an advanced account of agency.

The Critical Capabilities Approach (CCA) is a set of theories that aim to address both inequality in skills development and a shift away from a narrow focus on immediate employability and production (McGrath, 2018). It is an approach that builds upon the traditional human capital approach by recognising the importance of agency and structure and is thus influenced by the political economy of skills tradition, critical realism, and feminist theory. Although CCA has been developed in different contexts, McGrath *et al.*, (2022) recently wrote an article, *New VET Theories for New Times: The Critical Capabilities Approach to Vocational Education and Training and its Potential for Theorising a Transformed and Transformational VET*, which focuses on CCA best traits. This article is framed within broader notions of sustainable human development (McGrath, 2012; McGrath and Powell, 2016) and just transitions (Swilling and Annecke, 2012). However, an adequate theorisation of how CCA works together with the emerging skills for just transitions literature has yet to be established (McGrath *et al.*, 2020; McGrath *et al.*, 2022: 13). Thus far, CCA has not been practically tested. This approach will grow a strong focus on the need to consider young people's voices when articulating their aspirations for meaningful work and lives, as well as their experience of marginalisation and disempowerment.

The second recommendation is that policies should be informative and accommodative enough for students to understand all its aims and purposes, how it started and the initial reasons for its formation. This will assist students to make better educational decisions moving forward and give students enough courage to want to change the world for the better rather than just 'learning to work' and regarding themselves as second class.

Thirdly, to avoid a lot of unpreparedness from both students and lecturers. South African government need to divorce themselves from constant changing of curriculum. This will also decrease the high failure rates in traditional schools, which results in forcing learners to enrol at

TVET. Although, change is good for enhancement and remain globally competitive as the literature comprehends; however, educational authorities need to come up with a stable curriculum that does not alter too many changes whenever it gets upgraded.

Educational and social Policies certainly need to be restructured in a way that students can easily navigate their way through PhDs and easily change career paths whenever they feel like they do not like what they are doing.

For the fact that NC(V) students are mostly ‘adolescents, rather than young mature, responsible adults’ as opposed to in the past (Buthelezi, 2018). Mostly have not adapted well to the less rigid environment like that of college where students are not reprimanded for not doing homework, late coming or absenteeism (p. 8). Majority of participants expressed that they are going through hardships to adapt in a new environment like TVET due to the difficulty of subjects themselves, too much work and lack of support. Hence, this potentially calls for more research, to explore on the various types of behavioural patterns that students carry, as well as their age differences and how they can be accommodated accordingly. This will assist the government and educational authorities when they draft their policies, to consider the kinds of students they are dealing with and their specific needs.

5.3 Limitations

For an empirically based qualitative study, a good sample size for saturation is from 9-16 participants, to yield rich data and a point of no new data (Vasileiou *et al.*, 2018: 3). However, the data collected from a small sample size cannot be generalisable to a wider context. Although, that was not the main purpose of this study, this study is more interested in the stories, experiences and voices of students.

Due to snowballing furthermore utilised as a method of data collection, there may have been a potential bias of answers. Such as Mbali and Kabelo who arranged the interviews although, by the time of the interview they were no longer available. Mbali said she was occupied in a family meeting, and Kabelo’s phone was off by the time of interview (later responded that he had low battery and was still on his way home). The interviews were both rescheduled for other different days. Hence, there may have been a discussion between interviewers and their recruiters who could be their friends or relatives regarding the details of the interview.

5.4 Overall conclusion

This study expressed the capacity of student's choices for vocational education and through lenses of social/educational practice within the voices of students themselves. Both freewill (rational choice) versus circumstances are expressed as fully embodied in the decision-making process of students and their cultural proximity. Manifold and composite voices were expressed. Some voices expressed satisfaction with their choices for vocational education over academic education. TVET is regarded as a good institution by those who either dropped out or did not pass well in their secondary schools - looking forward for a "second chance". Which consolidates that students are also relieved to know that there is a second opportunity if one does not make it in their traditional schools.

While other voices expressed dissatisfaction with the capacity in which they make choices; representing a sense of self that is caught in between preferences and having no choice resulting in bounded rational decisions. This perpetuates inequalities and a naïve society of youngsters who feel they will always come 'second'.

However, Critical social policy framework and critical capability approach aim at advocating for human needs, agency and addressing how the government and social policies should attend to the challenges and the various inequalities which serves as a platform where students can recover their voices.

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APPENDIX A: PROFILE OF PARTICIPANTS

Smangaliso

Smangaliso is a 25-year-old male residing in Pretoria and grew up in Mpumalanga Bushbuckridge. He dropped out of university and now studies secondary vocational training in TVET. During his interview, it was noticed that he dropped out of his original school and joined Tshwane South College. It was viewed that he wanted to learn and study civil engineering; the subjects he has taken up are carpentry and roofing. He further disclosed he always wanted to pursue civil engineering and found voluntary education beneficial because he could learn practical knowledge from it. He has an uncle who is a builder. Thus, he can apply his practical knowledge on the construction site and smoothen his experiences.

Mthokozisi

A 21-year-old, Male, Kgalabatsane native, Mpumalanga origin, is a student at a TVET Institution. He grew up in Kgalabatsane and attended Hebron Tech for his secondary school. He had always wanted to acquire a skill, a trade and therefore chose to enrol in the TVET institution after completing Grade 11. He is currently attending Tshwane South, studying mechanical subjects such as fitting and turning.

Having experienced the education and attending the classes and workshops, he is content and happy with his choice of institution. He is passionate about the trade and believes that with the knowledge and skill he has acquired, he will be able to secure a job. He also understands what it takes to apply for a learnership due to the information shared by his teacher back in his secondary school.

He was inspired by people around him, his stepfather being one of them. His results in Secondary school showed him what he was good at, and this informed his decision to pursue vocational education instead of university education, I mathematics and enlist mark from I previous cool were poor. He believes that one in TVET is better than going to university as the theory is deeper and the practical work is more appreciated. He also believes that vocational education has a future in South Africa as engineering will always be in demand.

Zipokazi

A 24-year-old, male, resides in Pretoria Acadia, comes from Eastern Cape, failed matric and was left with no other choice but to enrol in a TVET Institution. Having attended secondary school in Queenstown, he opted to attend Tshwane South College to pursue his dream of becoming an entrepreneur. The college provided him with practical and theoretical knowledge, teaching him computer and office admin related subjects. Becoming aware of the importance of vocational education, he believes in its ability to provide a second chance to dropouts and that it is a viable option for those who have failed matric.

He believes that it provides the same educational benefits as a university, but in a shorter amount of time. His grades from secondary school were in the range of 60-70, with his lowest being 50. His educational choice has been based on his secondary school results, and he stands firm in his

decision to pursue vocational education. He believes that it has a future in South Africa and that no changes need to be made.

Karabo

A 22-year-old Winterveld native, Karabo, was raised in the same area she currently resides in (in Pretoria). Although she identifies as female, her choice of education was not easy. Despite completing her secondary school at Dr Sam Mutsunyane Comprehensive school, Karabo failed matric and enrolled for a TVET institution instead. At her TVET institution, Karabo faced many challenges including lack of resources, unkind lecturers and bursary complaints.

Karabo was enrolled for Tourism Management and though it was a subject she was familiar with from high school, there were no extra-curricular activities available at the institution. Karabo was content with her choice of institution, as it offered the subject, she was most interested in. When asked if she was likely to get a job with this kind of subject, Karabo was unsure. This was due to her lack of good grade results and the fact that she did not know of anyone who had successfully completed their TVET course and got a job.

Karabo learned about the TVET institution through the internet and believes that its aim is to give dropouts a chance. She does not think that the purpose of the TVET institution is much different from that of secondary school. If she were to choose again, she would opt for a university education, preferably in law. Karabo believes that vocational education does have a future in South Africa, as it helps students get jobs. However, she does not think it is suitable for those who are doing well in secondary school.

Dikeledi

At 21 years old, the Interviewee was born and bred in Mabopane, a small town in South Africa. Identifying as a female, she attended Lixloxlo Secondary where she did not pass her grade 12 final exams. Despite this, she decided to enrol in a vocational education institution. Although the institution was good, the Interviewee was doing 7 subjects, of which one was Tourism, a subject she was passionate about.

When asked if she was happy with her choice of institution, she said yes, as she believed it gave people with skills a chance to have matric and it was more practical. She also feels that voluntary education is the best, and she can get a job as a Tourism operator. However, she also finds it challenging despite all the skills that she might on get a job due to Covid.

The Interviewee chose vocational education over university education because her grade 12 results were not good enough. She was performing well and had scores between 60-70 but picked the wrong subjects. Despite this, if she had to make the choice again, she would still choose vocational education as it was much easier and more financially viable. The Interviewee believes that vocational education has a future in South Africa, but that it needs more recognition. She also feels that vocational education needs to be treated equally to university education and that communication should be improved.

Kulani

23-year-old, the male interviewee, hailing from the Free State, left his secondary school in Grade 11 due to peer pressure and enrolled into a TVET institution. He was doing Office Practice, Life Orientation, English, and other subjects of his choice at Tshwane, a TVET institution in Pretoria. He was very happy with his choice as the registration was straightforward and he was content with the subjects he had chosen. He was looking forward to a career in office administration and customer service, believing he had the right qualities to be successful in these areas, especially due to his polite and friendly nature.

He learnt about TVET institutions through the internet and believed their purpose was to provide a more practical education than secondary school and different from university institutions due to the lack of funds he saw in the former. His decision to enroll in such an institution was informed by his low grades in secondary school and the support he saw from his lecturer, who he saw as his mother figure. He believed vocational education had a future in South Africa as it showed young South Africans how to have a life without excuses.

Katlego

A 24-year-old, Male, from Soshanguve (born and bred) in Pretoria, was facing a dilemma about his age not matching with the grade he was attending at the time. Encouraged by his father, the young man decided to leave secondary school by Grade 10 in Matsimela and enroll for a TVET college (he was already 20 by that time). Here, he was taking classes such as Business practice, office practice, personal assistant, office data processing and fundamentals. He is happy with his choice of institution since he was learning things that would help him in his future career. He wanted to get level 4 certificate and was still in the process of finding a career path. He was confident he could get a job after completing vocational education because of his fast-learning abilities and hard work. He was aware of the different purpose of TVET institution and secondary school, since the former was more practical.

He opted for vocational training instead of university because he felt that having a college certificate was more beneficial than a university one, since university students do not acquire much experience. He was performing well at secondary school but could not remember his grades. He believed that TVET institution had a future in South Africa, since he realised that people in his environment could not use simple things such as Microsoft word, photocopy machine, and other office stuff. He thought there should be more amenities such as sports centers, libraries and student cards.

Zintle

A 22-year-old female from Limpopo, currently living in Sunnyside, failed and left Loboli high school in Grade 11 in search for a better alternative to further her education. She decided to enroll for a TVET at Pretoria Campus. She is currently doing Tourism, Science of Tourism, Sustainable Tourism in South Africa, Client Services and Human Relations, Life Skills, Computer Practice, Math's Literacy and Language English. She has experienced some difficulties with her lecturers, especially the one teaching Computer Tourism Operations. She explains that they do not have computers, and they were promised that they would get them last year, but it was not done. They do not even get data to send things online, they must buy their own data.

She believes that the aim of a vocational institution is to help those who did not complete Matric, to get to a college and do a certain course. She further explains that it is different from secondary school, as it involves practical and theory. She was not a much interactive participant, and she

believes that vocational education is ideal for students who are being given a second chance, and not necessarily students who are well performing.

Kopano

A 20-year-old male, residing in Pretoria (was recently at home in Olievenhout for school holidays by the time of interview). He had made the decision to pursue a vocational education institution before Grade 12; attended Seshego secondary school and was currently enrolled in a learnership program. Olievenhout was happy with his choice of institution, as the atmosphere was comfortable, and the teachers encouraged the students to ask questions. He was studying business entrepreneurship and was happy with the choice of subject as it was interesting.

Kopano believes that University is more difficult and challenging. His secondary school grades were not the best nor the worst, but he still made the decision to pursue vocational education. He believes vocational education has a future in South Africa, as he thought most people his age would see the necessity of it. He also believes that those who completed vocational education are qualified to the same jobs as those who complete University.

Kopano expressed that while having vocational education could be beneficial, it was not likely to lead to high-level executive positions. He noted that having a business of his own and receiving assistance from various organizations could help, but that experience was key and could only be gained through dedication. He further emphasised that having a degree in business would give a much better chance of being hired as opposed to just a vocational education.

Leticia

Leticia is more of an introvert person and does not communicate much. The interview was conducted in English, but Leticia had a bit of a struggle and kept switching to her home language (Setswana), she was 20 years old by the time of interview.

Leticia was born and raised in Lehlabile (in Pretoria). Identifying herself as female, she attended Ikatisong Secondary School until Grade 11, when she failed and decided to enroll in a TVET institution. She is currently attending TVET college, where she is studying Financial Economics and Accounting. She loves Accounting with all her heart and hopes to pursue a career as an Auditor or Accountant. The Interviewee found out about TVET institutions from a friend of hers who was

attending one and believes that its aim is to provide those who dropped out of school or who wish to further their studies with the same educational opportunities as those who have completed matric.

She believes that the vocational education institutions are not that different from universities, aside from the fact that one does not need matric to attend the former. The Interviewee chose TVET due to her poor grade 11 results. She was performing well until the finals and believes that the examiners asked difficult questions that confused her. Her grades were between level 3 and level 6. She originally thought of repeating grade 11 but decided against it due to the religious differences between her and her peers.

Kabelo

A 22-year-old, male, from Lehlabile, Kabelo had to drop out from high school due to peer pressure and other issues. He then enrolled at a TVET College by Grade 9 and was determined to make something of himself. Kabelo chose to study financial management, Accounting and economics as he was inspired to become a chartered accountant. Despite the challenges he faced such as lack of funds and low attendance, he remained driven and motivated.

Kabelo learnt about TVET institutions through pamphlets and TV advertisements. He saw it as a quick route to enrol into a college without having a matric certificate. He was aware of the aim of the TVET institutions which is to equip students with skills to become employed and to build a better society.

He chose TVET instead of university as he did not have a matric certificate. Kabelo was performing well in his secondary school with a pass rate of 60-70%. He made his educational choices based on his grade results and his aim to become somebody in life. He believes TVET college has a major positive effect as it offers students a chance to find something to do in life and change their lives. Kabelo was very interactive in his interview.

Overall, Kabelo believes that vocational education is great for those who did not have the opportunity to continue their studies at secondary school. Although the system is slow when it comes to getting into job positions, it is still a viable option.

Mbali

Mbali is a 20-year-old female from Soshanguve, born and bred. She attended Hlanganani Secondary School, but she left in Grade 10 to enrol in a TVET institution. She chose to do a course in Tourism, Life Orientation, English, and Maths Literacy, as these were subjects, she was passionate about and had a good understanding of. She was performing well at secondary school, but not as well in Consumer and History.

Mbali believes that the purpose of TVET institutions is to tuition differently than that of secondary school, as the teachers were stricter in her former school and did not offer the subjects she wanted to pursue. She hopes to pursue a career as a flight attendant, as travelling is something she loves to do, and she believes that with her qualifications she is likely to achieve her goal. Mbali learned about TVET institutions through videos she watched, and she was surprised to find that it was different from university education.

She chose vocational education because she does not have a Matric certificate. Mbali thinks there are areas where vocational institutions can improve, such as allowing field trips for tourism. She wishes that the lecturers would have a better attitude towards learners as well, and that they would not remove them from college for complaining about a lecturer.

Nandipha

The 23-year-old Interviewee is a female from Hammanskraal, Pretoria. After failing her Matric, she chose to pursue vocational education at Tshwane North College, where she is currently studying Tourism Level 2. She is passionate about travelling and believes that a career in the field of flight attendant or hospitality is her best option. She is pursuing subjects such as English, Afrikaans, Mathematics literacy, tourism operation, and sustainable tourism, and is happy with her choice of subjects.

Nandipha has experienced various educational and familial issues, which have impacted her educational choices. She had to travel between Pretoria and Alexandra in the morning for classes and the fights at home made it difficult for her to study. She lacked the necessary resources to pursue university education and opted for vocational education instead as it provided her with the second chance she was looking for. She is aware of the stereotype that university students are considered more intelligent than college students but believes that vocational education serves an important purpose in providing students with the opportunity to further their studies.

Nandipha has highlighted the need for improved resources, such as laptops, to assist students in their studies. She has also raised the need for improved support and accountability from lecturers, which would ensure students have equal opportunities to succeed. Overall, the interviewee has demonstrated a strong motivation to succeed and is optimistic about her prospects.

Nonka

Nonka is a 24-year-old female from Mamelodi, Pretoria. She grew up in Mamelodi and did not pass matric, so she enrolled in a TVET institution. She is currently in Tshwane College, studying NC(V) Tourism. She participates in occupational tracking classes but has noticed that the teacher of her Tour operation class is not willing to help the class and they are failing. Nonka chose Tourism because she could not find space in Public Admin. She is happy with her choice of subjects, as she understands them. She envisions getting a job as a tour guide and believes she can do the job.

Nonka learnt about TVET institutions at her secondary school and believes that the purpose of TVET institutions is to help students get jobs and give them a second chance if they don't pass matric. She believes that vocational education has a future in South Africa as there are many opportunities, such as opening one's own business. Her decision to choose vocational education was not based on her secondary school grades, however she was getting 40's and 50's, not more than 60's. Although she is content with her choice, she believes that Tour operation needs someone who is patient and that it is a more difficult subject.

Katiso

Katiso is a 21-year-old male, from Atteridgeville. He grew up in Atteridgeville and attended secondary school in Himalaya. After failing Grade 11, Katiso decided to enrol for a TVET institution, Tshwane South College. There, he is studying Personal Assistance, Maths, English and Life Orientation.

Katiso is happy with his choice of institution as the environment is conducive for someone who is serious about their studies. He is also happy with the subjects he took as it is something he is passionate about and good at. Katiso learnt about TVET institutions from his brother who recommended it to him as he thought it would be a better option for Katiso to improve his grades.

He believes the purpose of TVET institutions is different from that of secondary schools as the qualifications are the same, but the type of subjects and career choices are different. He also believes that the purpose of TVET institutions is like that of universities, but the qualifications are more advanced.

Katiso went to vocational education because he wanted to get his matric. His decision was informed by his poor grade results in secondary school, mainly in Afrikaans and Economics. Katiso believes vocational education has a future in South Africa as it provides an opportunity for people who have dropped out of school to improve their results and get qualifications. He believes the only way to improve is to go back to college.

APPENDIX B: INFORMED CONSENT



Faculty of Humanities
Fakulteit Geesteswetenskappe
Lefapha la Bomotheo



INFORMATION SHEET AND CONSENT FORM

Dear Participant

My name is Patience Motsatsi (student number 10480189). I am a master's student at the University of Pretoria's Sociology Department. I am conducting a study titled: "Students' Voices in Vocational Education: A Sociological Exploration" with the aim of completing my master's degree. The study seeks to evaluate how students make their choices for vocational education. The study tries to comprehend why students chose vocational education instead of academic education

at secondary level. The study broadly wants to incorporate the voices of students into the dialogue concerning vocational education.

I am requesting for you to take part in this study. I also request for your permission to audiotape the interview to maintain the accuracy of the data. Please note that participation in this study is completely voluntary, you can withdraw at any given time. If there are any questions as well that you feel uncomfortable to answer, you will not be forced to answer, you can choose to withdraw. There will be no consequences of any kind for withdrawal in the process, your decision will be respected should you decide to withdraw.

The interview will take roughly 60 minutes. All the data collected, and conversations will be treated with confidentiality. You have a choice to be kept anonymous, the information that will be gathered in this study will not be linked to your name and rather utilise pseudonyms to protect your identity. The information that will be communicated is solely for academic purposes, mainly for the academic purposes related to my study. All recordings will be kept in the department of sociology for a period of 15 years and anonymously so. They will only be accessed by me, the researcher, and my supervisor (Dr Sepetla Molapo) for confidentiality.

Your participation in this study will not lead to any direct incentives or benefits, however, the information will assist the social policies and educational department bodies to be able to change their education policies in a way that accommodates the needs of students and understanding the concerns of students and what they want. There are no anticipated risks for participating in this study. However, should you experience any kind of distress, during or after the interview, please feel free to contact the South African Depression and Anxiety Group (SADAG) service on 0800 12 13 14 for counselling and further educational and emotional support. Please feel free to ask any questions regarding the study and make sure that you understand the content of this letter before agreeing to participate. Your participation, however, will be much appreciated.

If you have any further questions or any concerns before or after the interview, please feel free to contact me on:

Patience Motsatsi: patiencehot@gmail.com

Cell No: 0662317882 (Patience Motsatsi)

Supervisor: Dr Sepetla Molapo

Email address: sepetla.molapo@up.ac.za

CONSENT

I hereby consent to participate in this study titled: “Students’ Voices in Vocational Education: A Sociological Exploration”. I understand that I am participating freely and without being forced in any way to do so. I also understand that I can withdraw from the discussion at any given point should I not want to proceed, and that this decision will not in any way affect me negatively.

I understand that this is an academic study whose aim is not necessarily to benefit me personally.

I have received the relevant contact numbers for any further queries or issues pertaining to this study.

I understand that my answers will remain confidential.

.....

Signature of participant

Date.....

I am willing for the interview to be audio recorded.

.....

Signature of participant

Date.....

Interviewer’s signature..... Date.....

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APPENDIX B: INTERVIEW SCHEDULE



Faculty of Humanities

Fakulteit Geesteswetenskappe
Lefapha la Bomotheo



Background Information:

Please tell me about yourself:

- How old are you?
- Where do you live?
- Where did you grow up?
- Where do you come from?
- How would you identify yourself in terms of gender?
- At which grade did you leave your secondary school to enrol for TVET institution?
Why?
- Where did you attend your Secondary school?

Educational Information:

- Can you tell me about the TVET institution that you are currently attending?
- Tell me about your educational activities (Occupational tracking classes, activities and so on)
- Are you happy with your choice of institution? Why?
- What subjects are you doing? Why?
- Are you happy with your choice of subjects? Why?
- What kind of work do you envisage with this kind of subjects?
- Do you think you are likely to get that job? Why?
- Do you perhaps know someone who successfully got a job after completing vocational education?

Knowledge of Vocational Education:

- How did you learn about vocational institutions (TVET)?
- What do you think is its aim?
- Do you think the purpose of TVET institution is different from that of secondary school?
 - If yes, how so?
 - If no, what makes them similar?
- Do you think or perhaps classify vocational education institutions as different from university institutions? How so/ Why?
 - Do you think they serve different purposes? How/ Why?

Factors Informing Choice of Vocational Education:

- Why did you choose vocational education instead of university education?
- What informed your decision?
- How well were you performing in your secondary school?
- What were your grades like, what kind of scores did you get?
- Did you make your educational choices because of your secondary grade results?
- If you were to choose again, would you make the choice for vocational education?

Prospects of Vocational Education:

- Do you think vocational education has a future in SA? Why?
- Are there any changes/modifications you would like to see in Vocational education? Where do you think they should improve?
- Is there anything else you would like to address or talk about in relation to this topic?

Conclusion:

Reflect on the participant's interview.

Thank the participant for their contribution/participation!
