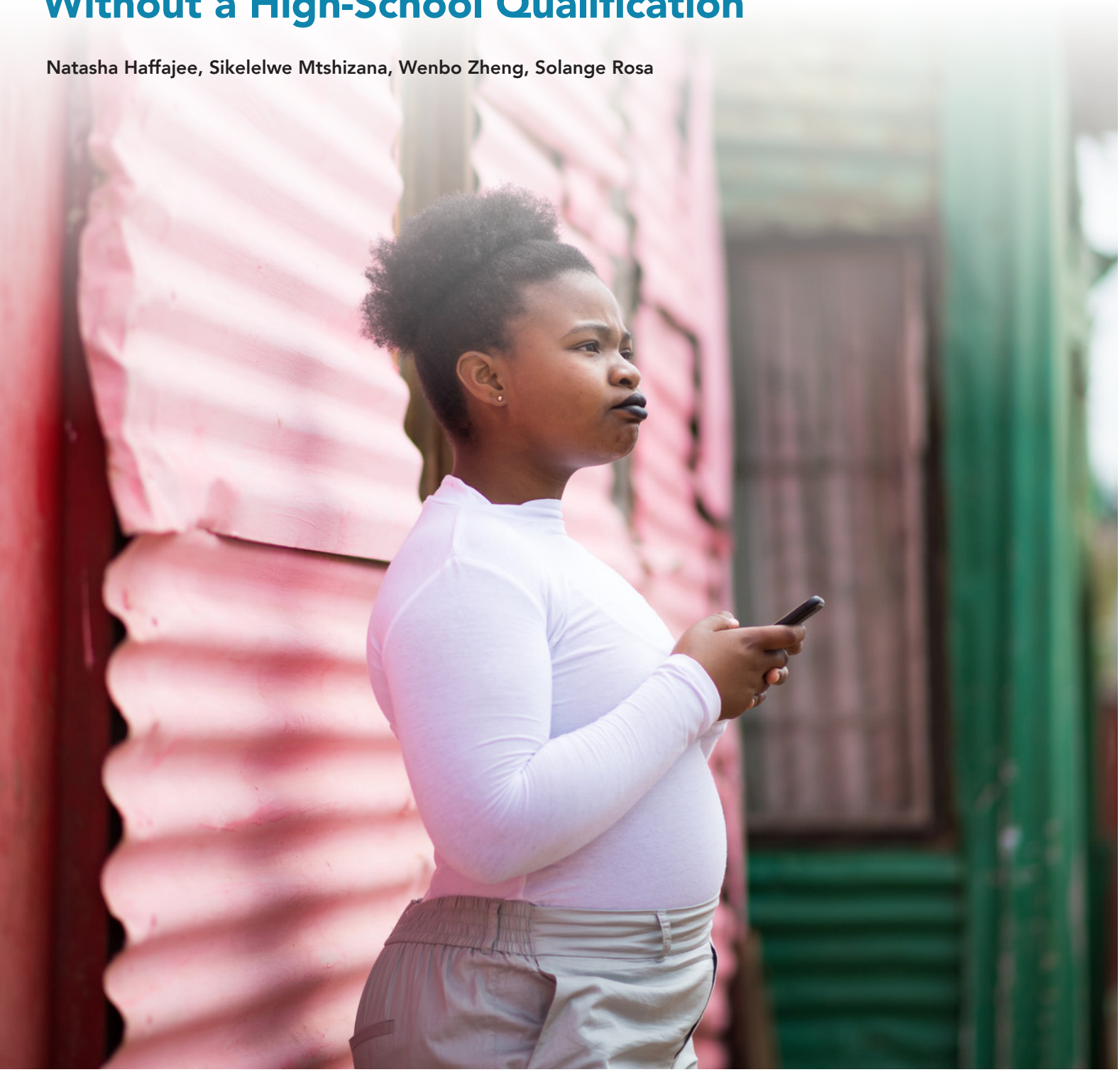
Reach Alliance

Unconventional Paths:

Cape Town Youths' Strategies for Earning a Living Without a High-School Qualification

Natasha Haffajee, Sikelelwe Mtshizana, Wenbo Zheng, Solange Rosa



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Center for Inclusive Growth

The Reach Alliance

The Reach Alliance is a consortium of global universities — with partners in Ghana, South Africa, Mexico, Canada, United States, United Kingdom, Australia, and Singapore — developing the leaders we need to solve urgent local challenges of the hard to reach — those underserved for geographic, administrative, or social reasons. Working in interdisciplinary teams, Reach's globally minded students use rigorous research methods to identify innovative solutions to climate, public health, and economic challenges. The United Nations Sustainable Development Goals (SDGs) provide inspiration and a guiding framework. Research is conducted in collaboration with local communities and with guidance from university faculty members, building capacity and skills among Reach's student researchers.

The power of the Reach Alliance stems from engaging leading universities to unleash actionable research insights for impact. These insights have been published in numerous journals such as *The Lancet* and *BMJ Global Health* and are being used by policymakers and sector leaders, such as the Government of Canada and the *Stanford Social Innovation Review*, to catalyze impact around the world.

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Note: Authors are listed alphabetically with the faculty mentor listed last.

Cover photo: Youth staying connected to employment opportunities

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Contribution	Contributor (initials)
Conception or design of the work	NH, SK, SM, WZ
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Data analysis and interpretation	NH
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Executive Summary

South Africa's youth unemployment crisis is often described in numbers, but behind the statistics lie the untold stories of young people who leave school without a qualification. This research set out to explore one central question: how can the employability of youth without high-school qualifications be supported?

The challenge is stark. Youth living in the Cape Flats of Cape Town, one of South Africa's low-income areas with high levels of social issues, face layered barriers: disrupted schooling, limited digital access, and systems that measure potential almost exclusively through certificates. Once deterred from completing high school, young people are often categorized as a "drop-out," a label carrying negative connotations and assumptions of failure. This label subsequently leads to being locked out of opportunity and further entrenched in cycles of poverty.

Our intention was modest: to listen. Through seven in-depth interviews with young people aged 18 to 35, alongside discussions with development practitioners, this study traces the routes young people carved for themselves. Instead of focusing on what was missing, it asked what they were building. Their answers revealed pathways that were unconventional but purposeful, often beginning with small acts: applying for jobs despite not meeting requirements, volunteering, or helping in family businesses. These acts, while easily overlooked, became sources of momentum, nurturing resilience, confidence, and income generation.

We heard about diverse and sometimes unexpected forms of participation in work and learning. What may appear as temporary or informal activity often carried deep personal and social meaning — reshaping how success, contribution, and progress are understood. Support came from many sources — family, peers, and youth development programs — yet barriers also persisted, from systemic gatekeeping and digital exclusion to inner battles with confidence and belonging.

The impact of this work lies less in prescribing solutions than in reframing narratives. These young people were not static or disengaged; they were moving, experimenting, reinventing themselves, and creating in ways that existing systems rarely recognize. Their stories illuminate both the ingenuity of individual tactics and the structural gaps that constrain them.

This study was small and exploratory, limited to a single geography and cross-sectional interviews. Yet the voices captured here point to a larger truth: not all deterred youth are waiting to be saved. They are already in motion. The challenge for policy, practice, and research is to keep pace with this movement by building systems that extend, rather than obstruct, their efforts.

Tracing the Detour

Before we can understand the decisions and strategies that shape the lives of deterred youth in Cape Town, we must first locate them within the broader terrain they inherited. Their journeys did not begin at the point of leaving school. They trace back through generations of structural inequality, institutional failure, constrained opportunity, and — more specific to this case study — domestic instability, documentation issues, peer influence, medical conditions, academic instability, and mental health.

CRISIS ROOTED IN HISTORY

In South Africa, the road from childhood to adulthood is often mapped in reverse. Most young people must make long-term decisions under the weight of short-term survival. However, some carry the reality of navigating systems that seldom accommodate their realities. Expectations are high: complete school, study further, and find

work. Yet for many, especially those from working-class and impoverished communities, the path is neither paved nor clearly signposted.

Youth unemployment in South Africa is not merely a social issue; it is a structural, generational, and embedded crisis. Official figures place unemployment rates among 15 to 35-year-olds at 46.1 per cent as of the first quarter of 2025.[1] This figure obscures a more complex picture, which excludes discouraged job seekers, those in informal or unstable work, and the many young people contributing in ways that go unrecognized by formal labour statistics. For those without a matriculation certificate — the national school-leaving qualification — the path narrows even more drastically.

The roots of this crisis reach deep into the country's past. During apartheid (1948 to 1994), Black South Africans were systematically dispossessed of land, excluded from mainstream quality education, and denied access to certain professions through policies such as job reservation and forced removals. Spatial segregation was deliberately enforced, with millions relocated to townships on the urban periphery — areas still marked by poor infrastructure, inadequate schooling, and limited economic opportunity.

The end of apartheid and the democratic transition in 1994 brought hope and a new constitutional commitment to equality. However, the legacies of historical injustice have proven entrenched and resistant to rapid transformation, even for those born in the advent of democracy for all in South Africa. The young people of today were born in the wake of that 1994 promise. Many are first-generation students, raised in households still working through systemic disadvantage, as well as the physical, and psychological aftermath of racial marginalization. They inherit the burdens of intergenerational poverty, unequal education, and under-resourced infrastructure.

Despite waves of government interventions to support young people, youth wage subsidies, skills development initiatives, and entrepreneurship hubs, the reality on the ground remains disjointed.[2] While policymakers debate qualifications and targets, young people make urgent, adaptive decisions that remain invisible to official structures.

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The crisis, then, is not only one of employment. It is one of recognition. Youth who leave school early, often referred to in policy as "NEETs" (not in education, employment, or training), are rendered voiceless by acronyms that erase their personhood. Yet they are everywhere: assisting in family-run businesses, manufacturing, offering services, taking on temporary events work, or volunteering at their local NGO or church. Their activities are often undocumented, but they carry real weight.

What makes South Africa's youth unemployment problem particularly dire is not simply a lack of motivation — young people's desire to work is palpable and their ingenuity is present. Rather, the systems that might scaffold success have not kept pace. Entry-level jobs require prior formal experience; internships require travel that young people cannot afford; and administrative posts call for often unattainable certificates through a school system that long ago failed them.[3]

1 "Census 1996: Community Profile Databases — Introduction," Statistics South Africa, 🔗; Monde Makiwane, "Youth and Well-Being: A South African Case Study," *Social Indicators Research* 94, no. 3 (2009): 1–17; "South Africa's Youth Unemployment Hits 62.4% in Q1 2025," Ecofin Agency, May 2025. 🔗

2 Ariane De Lannoy, Lauren Graham, Leila Patel, and Murray Leibbrandt, *What Drives Youth Unemployment and What Interventions Help? A Systematic Overview of the Evidence and a Theory of Change for South Africa* (Cape Town: Southern Africa Labour and Development Research Unit [SALDRU], University of Cape Town; Johannesburg: Centre for Social Development in Africa [CSDA], University of Johannesburg, 2018).

3 Chantal Mlatsheni, "Youth Unemployment and the Transition from School to Work in Cape Town," in *Urban Challenges: Youth and Employment in Cape Town*, edted by Martin Hall (Cape Town: HSRC Press, 2014), 27–42.

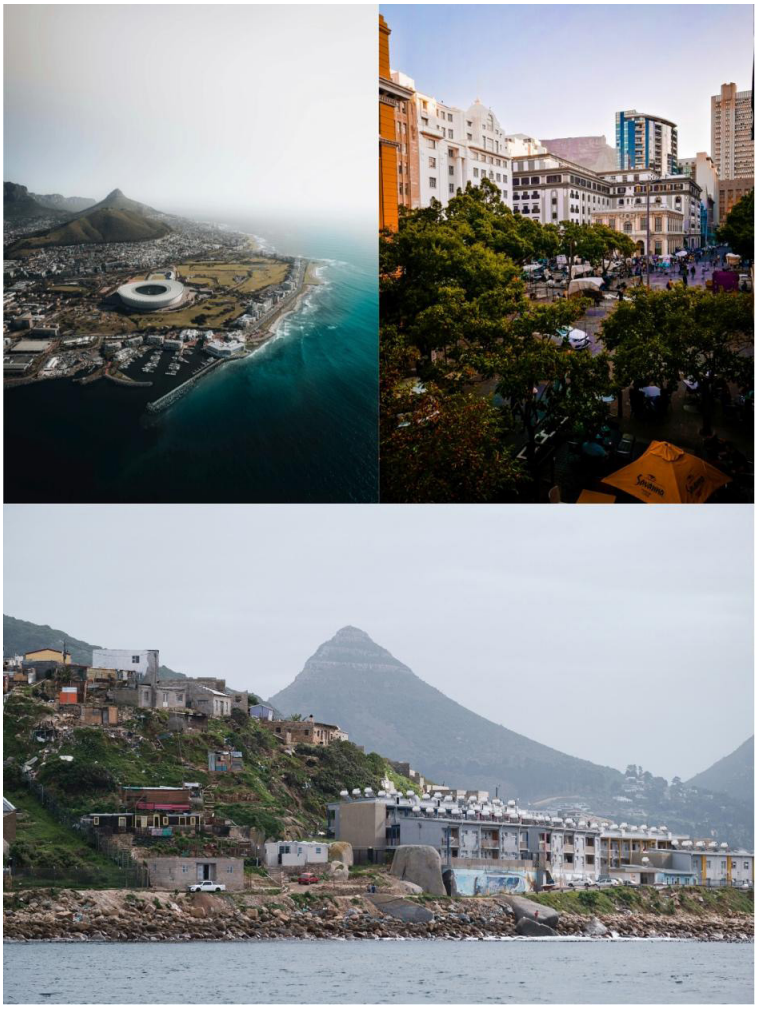

FIGURE 1. Cape Town, a city divided

To write about South Africa's youth unemployment is not merely to engage with an abstract policy issue, but to map the lived realities of exclusion and survival. It is also important to begin, not from a top-down perspective, but to adopt a bottom-up approach where young people actively negotiate the constraints and possibilities of their socioeconomic environments. It is from this ground-level perspective that our inquiry takes shape, one that aligns with Sustainable Development Goal (SDG) 8 on decent work and economic growth.[4] At its core, this research asks: How can we support the employability of youth without high-school qualifications in South Africa?

A CITY DIVIDED, A FUTURE DETERRED

Captured from above, the top images in Figure 1 lay bare South Africa's dual economy in stark relief. One part is affluent and globally connected, with strategic importance rooted in international networks, cultural influence, and contributions to national development. The other (see lower image) is characterized by poverty, informal work, and severely limited access to quality education and infrastructure, particularly in historically disadvantaged communities. This divide mirrors South Africa's broader structural inequality, where opportunity and wealth remain profoundly unevenly distributed, delineated based on apartheid racial divides.

4 "Goal 8: Promote Sustained, Inclusive and Sustainable Economic Growth, Full and Productive Employment and Decent Work for All," United Nations.

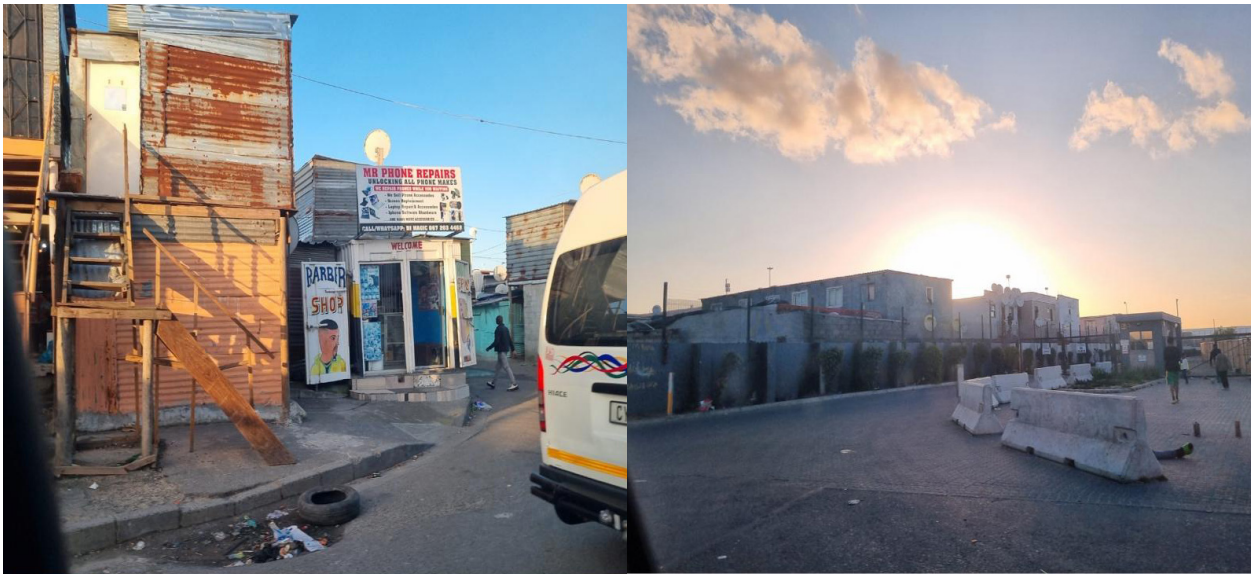

FIGURE 2. Cape Flats Area, Cape Town

Cape Town serves as the lens for inquiry into this duality.[5] It is a city of postcard beauty, with its mountains, beaches, and vineyards that suggest affluence and promise. But from the ground, the view is very different. The city remains starkly divided: one Cape Town is connected, resourced, and legacy-rich; the other is spatially and socially distant, marked by violence, limited infrastructure, and low expectations.[6] We are interested in that second Cape Town, particularly in township and Cape Flats neighbourhoods, where resilience is more than a personal trait — it is a collective necessity.

The city remains starkly divided: one Cape Town is connected, resourced, and legacy-rich; the other is spatially and socially distant, marked by violence, limited infrastructure, and low expectations.

In these areas, leaving school rarely occurs in a moment; it involves a slow drift. Drawing from our fieldwork, it is clear that many young people begin disconnecting from school long before their final decision to leave. Financial strain is one of the earliest and most persistent pressures. School-going often involves more than just attendance: taxi fares, uniforms, cellular service credits and internet data to access assignments, and printed materials all become barriers. But the deeper impact of financial difficulty tends to manifest at home. Household tensions rise under economic stress, and young people internalize the pressure to contribute, whether through emotional labour, domestic responsibility, or eventually, income generation.

Academic struggle is another recurring feature. Interviewees often described falling behind from a young age, sometimes as early as Grade 4. They spoke of large class sizes, minimal individual support, and a lack of tailored interventions when learning difficulties arise. Without private tutoring, a quiet study space, or consistent feedback, school becomes a site of frustration rather than growth. Failing a grade can trigger shame; failing

5 Nigel Worden, *The Making of Modern South Africa: Conquest, Apartheid, Democracy*, 6th ed. (Hoboken: Wiley-Blackwell, 2023).

6 Ivan Turok, "Urbanisation and Development in South Africa: Economic Imperatives, Spatial Distortions and Strategic Responses," *Urbanisation and Emerging Population Issues Working Paper Series*, no. 8 (London: United Nations Population Fund [UNFPA] and International Institute for Environment and Development [IIED], 2012).

again can solidify a sense of inadequacy. Over time, learners may stop attending altogether as a result of accumulated discouragement.

Social dynamics also play a role. In many cases, young people are surrounded by others who have also left school. When older siblings, cousins, or community members have exited the system, doing the same becomes more understandable, even expected. Peer influence can also pull young people away from school in more direct ways, particularly in contexts where gang presence is strong, or where safety requires avoiding certain routes or associations. Few feel empowered to resist these currents alone.

Health, both physical and mental, is a quiet but powerful deterrent. Several of those we spoke with reflected on chronic illness that disrupted their attendance or learning. Some missed large portions of the school year as a result of hospital visits or treatment, only to return to an unfamiliar curriculum and no support in catching up. Others spoke of depression and anxiety that made daily functioning difficult, let alone academic engagement. These challenges are rarely acknowledged in school spaces, and almost never supported meaningfully.

For young women added responsibilities begin to shape their school trajectory in subtle ways. Even in the absence of formal caregiving roles, many described taking on more household responsibilities over time, from cooking and cleaning to budgeting and helping with younger siblings. When life circumstances shift, a parent passes away, a sibling falls ill, a pregnancy occurs, the expectation that girls step in is rarely questioned. While not all described this dynamic explicitly, the cumulative weight of care work often preceded their school exit.

In many cases, the decision to leave school was not made in a single moment. It came after a missed term, an unsuccessful attempt to transfer, or an extended period of absence due to legal processes affecting their families or personal issues. When return becomes logistically difficult because of re-enrolment deadlines, exam fees, or sheer embarrassment, young people quietly disappear from the system. The shame of returning as an older learner in a class of younger peers, or of having to explain one's absence, often cements their choice to stay away.

Even for those who try to re-enter, the path is rarely clear. Some attempted to rewrite matric exams but were told they'd missed deadlines. Others didn't know where to go or how to navigate the process without assistance. The most accessible opportunities, like short courses or internships, are often closed to anyone without a matric certificate. And many young people lack the digital access or formal documentation required for application processes. Cellular service credits and transport are unaffordable and waiting on hold to speak to a program administrator can consume many days' worth of energy and hope.

These barriers accumulate. While individual acts of perseverance were visible in many stories, returning to school, enrolling in a youth development program, or learning on the job in a family business, they were almost always self-driven. Systems rarely meet young people where they are. Instead, those who are pushed out must become architects of their own path, assembling new routines, new relationships, and new definitions of progress from what is available. This is why we refer to "deterred youth," not dropouts, because naming the forces that push young people out of school is the first step to recognizing, and ultimately addressing them.

SELF-PERCEPTION AND THE MEANING OF SUCCESS

Long before young people exit the system, they often exit the national narrative. Without matric, they are viewed through a deficit lens:

"unqualified," "unskilled," "unemployable."[7] However, language is never neutral; it creates meaning and it shapes self-perception. It determines whether a young person feels seen, and whether they believe a meaningful future is possible.

Theories of self-efficacy remind us that mastery experiences — the act of succeeding at a task — are critical to building a sense of agency.[8] For deterred youth, traditional systems rarely enable these experiences. But youth build mastery elsewhere: in health and safety, manufacturing, or administration services. These everyday actions reflect competence and creativity — traits that formal systems claim to reward, but often ignore.[9]

Redefining success is not lowering standards. It is about acknowledging lived realities. When we measure only degrees and job contracts, we miss the slow, disciplined work of getting by. And we miss the insight into how young people develop and understand their own worth. Ultimately, how a young person sees themselves may be the most reliable indicator of whether they will persist, adapt, and seek future opportunities. Systems that ignore this inner landscape risk misrepresenting the very people they aim to support.

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Together, these historical, spatial, and perceptual dimensions outline the terrain in which deterred youth make their choices. The forces shaping early school exit and constraining re-entry are embedded in South Africa's social fabric, and in Cape Town they are reinforced by a physical and economic geography still marked by racial and socioeconomic segregation, and uneven access to opportunity. Understanding this backdrop is essential to the core issue of the employability of youth without high-school qualifications.

Research Approach: Listening to Learn

This research was designed around one simple principle: listen first. Instead of starting with assumptions about what young people need, we asked them to tell us their stories in their own words. We conducted seven in-depth interviews with young people aged 18 to 35 from Cape Town's townships and Cape Flats areas. All had left school without graduating but had found ways to generate income.

The interviews were conducted online and lasted 60 to 90 minutes each. We asked open-ended questions: *Tell us about your journey after leaving school. What does success mean to you? What helped you move forward? What held you back?*

WHY THESE VOICES MATTER

The seven young people who participated in this research had remarkably diverse work experiences, despite lacking high-school certificates. Their combined journeys illustrate the range of pathways available to deterred youth and the strategies they use to navigate employment challenges. As Table 1 shows, each participant had multiple work experiences across different categories. Some, like Participant 4, had navigated through different pathways: entry points such as volunteering and development programs led to temporary and permanent forms

7 Catherine Campbell, *Letting Them Die: Why HIV/AIDS Prevention Programmes Fail* (Oxford: James Currey, 2003).

8 Albert Bandura, *Self-Efficacy: The Exercise of Control* (New York: W.H. Freeman, 1997).

9 Crain Soudien, *Realising the Dream: Unlearning the Logic of Race in the South African School* (Cape Town: HSRC Press, 2012).

of formal employment, respectively. Others, like Participant 7, had extensive experience in family businesses while also participating in structured development programs.

These seven young people don't represent all deterred youth in South Africa — that would be impossible with such a small group. But their combined 30-plus work experiences reveal patterns and possibilities that larger surveys often miss. Their stories show that the traditional view of "unemployed youth" misses the complex reality of how young people actually navigate work and learning.

Traditional research about unemployment focuses on what people lack: skills, qualifications, experience. This research focused on what people have: creativity, determination, networks, and knowledge gained outside formal systems. The goal wasn't to prove that everything is fine or that individual effort can overcome structural problems. Instead, we wanted to understand how young people navigate an uneven playing field and what we can learn from their strategies.

EXTENDING THEIR REACH

At the Reach Alliance, our mission is to amplify the stories of so-called "hard-to-reach" communities, those often overlooked by traditional systems and data. In practice, this project revealed something important: the young people we engaged with did not passively slip through the cracks — they found ways to reach into the networks, resources, and opportunities within their grasp. The more appropriate question here is therefore not *why are they hard to reach* or *how do we reach them?* A better question is: *How might we extend their reach?*

This perspective aligns with the Reach Alliance's ethos of starting from the ground up, drawing knowledge from lived experiences, and centring the ingenuity already present in everyday practice. Within Cape Flats and township communities, local strategies — from informal economies to neighbourhood support networks — reveal functioning, if fragile, models of resilience and care. These are not abstract examples of "potential"; they are active demonstrations of young people working with the resources at hand.

The aim here is not to romanticize adversity, but to recognize that movement is already happening. That recognition shapes the questions we ask and the way we interpret the stories shared, placing youth capability, rather than institutional absence, at the centre of the frame.

About the Pathways

The seven participants' accounts unfold in several stages. We start with how youth imagined and measured success, then move into the kinds of work that became available, before exploring what extended their reach and what held them back. Each thread connects to the next, offering a view of employability that appears less about entering systems than about negotiating the spaces around them.

DEFINING PATHWAYS AND SUCCESS

We understand a pathway not through institutional validation or formal milestones. Instead, it emerges through intentional effort, whether in formal or informal work, and often begins with entry points like volunteering, training, or simply showing up. These pathways were spoken about as motion rather than milestones. One of the questions we posed was, *What does success look like to you?* The responses suggested that success was not imagined as wealth or status; it was rarely about big houses or expensive cars. Instead, it was grounded and community-oriented, unfolding in stages: first, the ability to care for oneself; second, the capacity to support family and close others; and finally, the chance to serve as a role model within a wider community.

This layered definition of success appeared

repeatedly. One young man explained:

> It sounds very corny, but like, I am a — I am my own success story because I know what I went through. So when I lay down at night, I reflect back and I'm like, yo, remember when you had nothing and when you were told you're not going to be good enough? You're going to be nothing — you're just going to be another cousin on the streets. I don't want you under my roof. I don't want that negative dark spirit around my other children. You demonic, you a demon. Success is laying in my house, in my bed, protected. That's what it means me.

Here, success was defined in terms of personal security, dignity, and survival. Others echoed this emphasis on stability in tangible ways. One person explained, "Success is being able to support your parents … like if I want to go out, I have at least the money to say okay, I can go today." Another offered a similar view: "Success is having money for a car, for McDonald's. It's about not just surviving but living."

These measures of success were rarely abstract. They were concrete, often modest, but meaningful: buying groceries without borrowing, contributing to a sibling's school fees, affording a small indulgence without guilt. Each milestone achieved helped define the legitimacy of the path taken.

Crucially, success was also relational. It often involved restoring dignity within one's family or community. One person shared, "I want to be the example for my younger cousins. To say yes, we don't have [a matric] but we can still make a living." Others spoke of internal transformation: "There's nothing to be ashamed of … Yes, it is a setback mindset, but we forget obstacles in our life and we just break through the obstacles and move on to the next one."

Rather than a single dream or a fixed trajectory, many described success as the ability to adapt, to hold multiple possibilities at once, and to pivot as life required. One put it plainly: "From my experiences, if you have one idea [and] ... If something happens and you can't control that idea, you're in a setback because you didn't have any better plans."

In this framing, holding multiple aspirations was not seen as indecision — it was a strategy. It reflected a world in which contingency is constant, and resilience means being able to re-route without losing one's sense of purpose. Figure 3 illustrates this nonlinear nature of unconventional pathways, showing how young people's journeys bend, pause, and overlap rather than follow a straight line.

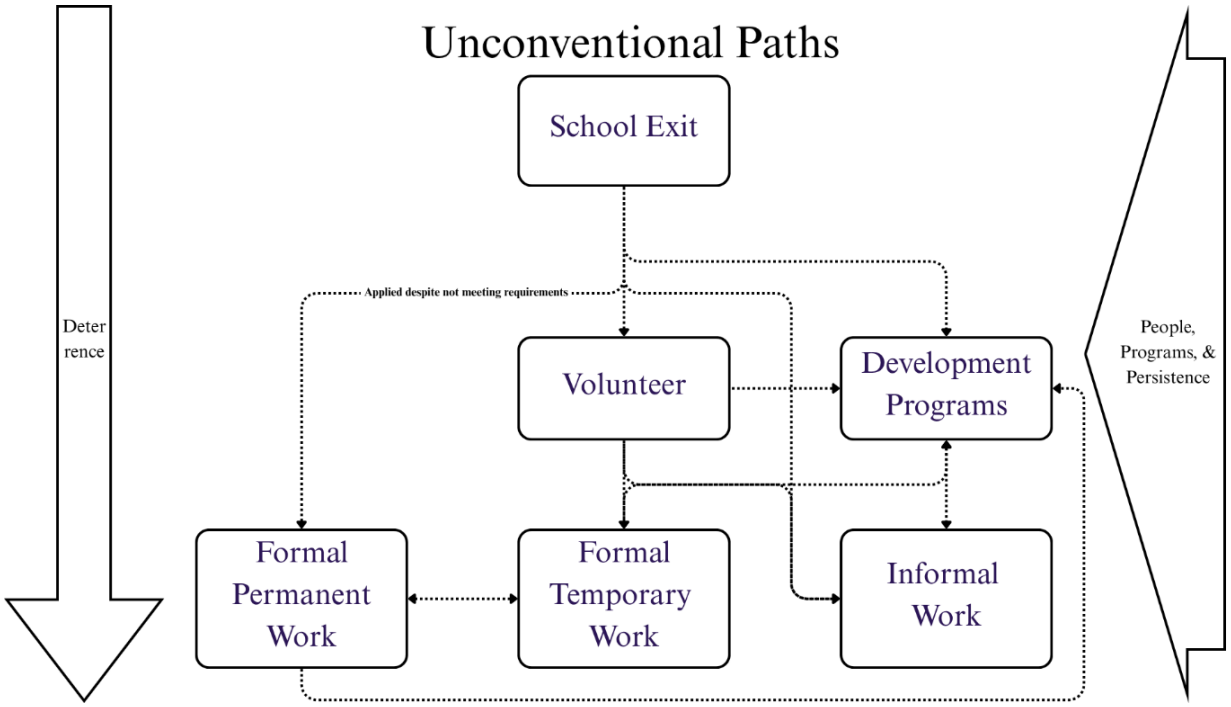

FIGURE 3. Unconventional paths emerging in response to deterrence and reinforced by support

THE FORMS THESE PATHWAYS TOOK

The young people who took part in this research described numerous, often nonlinear, pathways that led to three categories of work: formal permanent employment, formal temporary employment, and informal (family-based business) employment. These were accessed through three main entry points: applying even when not meeting eligibility criteria, volunteering, or joining structured development programs.

As these stories unfolded, what became clear was that these pathways were rarely linear. Youth moved back and forth between categories, pausing, cycling, or overlapping rather than following a single upward/forward track. Figure 3 depicts this nonlinear movement, showing how pathways bent and re-formed over time. These categories were not abstract. They came through in the specific work histories that participants shared. Table 1 illustrates this range of experiences and entry points, highlighting how individuals often navigated across multiple types of work over time.

Formal permanent work. Though relatively rare among those interviewed, a small number of youth without high-school qualifications did manage to secure permanent employment. They usually obtained these roles — as classroom and retail assistants or customer service agents — by directly applying to organizations despite not meeting the stated education requirements.

Their success lay not in meeting eligibility criteria but in moving past them. They applied, were shortlisted (sometimes because screening processes overlooked the missing qualification), and advanced to interview and assessment stages. That they made it this far suggested that qualification-based entry requirements for entry-level roles may not always reflect actual ability. However, even when they were hired, the journey was not straightforward. Several spoke about experiencing imposter syndrome, feeling as though they had somehow "tricked" employers into giving them the job. These doubts did not disappear once inside the workplace, and in some cases shaped how they approached their roles.

Table 1. *Work experiences and entry points that participants described*

Participant	Work/entry-point type	Work/entry-point title
Participant 1	Formal permanent work	Call centre agent
Participant 1	Formal permanent work	Outbound caller
Participant 1	Formal permanent work	Call centre agent
Participant 1	Formal permanent work	Retail/beauty consultant
Participant 2	Volunteer	Reading partner – Action Volunteers Africa
Participant 2	Formal temporary work	Educational assistant – reading and mathematics
Participant 2	Formal temporary work	Waiter – events company
Participant 2	Formal temporary work	Bartender – events company
Participant 2	Formal temporary work	Waiter/bartender – multiple companies
Participant 3	Informal work	Informal sales
Participant 3	Informal work	Cleaner
Participant 3	Development program	OLAF program
Participant 3	Development program	Upholstery course
Participant 3	Development program	Digital skills program
Participant 3	Informal work	Gift set business owner
Participant 4	Development program	Chrysalis Academy (pre-military program)
Participant 4	Formal temporary work	Hospital porter (internship)
Participant 4	Formal temporary work	Houseman (waterfront hotel)
Participant 4	Development program	Basic computer literacy course
Participant 4	Volunteer	Church Administrator
Participant 4	Development program	Fire marshal certification
Participant 4	Development program	GROW Leadership Academy
Participant 5	Informal work	Unspecified odd jobs
Participant 5	Development program	GROW Leadership Academy
Participant 5	Development program	Project management (partial)
Participant 6	Informal work	Casual worker – father's company
Participant 6	Development program	First aid level 1 certification
Participant 6	Development program	GROW Leadership Academy
Participant 7	Informal work	Assistant – uncle's flooring business
Participant 7	Informal work	Assistant – father's business
Participant 7	Informal work	Assistant – mother's manufacturing work
Participant 7	Development program	GROW Leadership Academy

Formal temporary work. A larger group of young people interviewed gained work experience through temporary placements, often with stipends, linked to structured youth programs. Programs such as RLabs' six-month-long GROW Leadership Academy program and Chrysalis Academy emerged as significant entry points.[10] These were more than just opportunities to gain work experience — they were sites of self-discovery and healing. One explained, "GLA has helped me so much … It's holistic. It gives technical skills, but also helps you understand yourself better." Another described a major shift: "Before Chrysalis, I didn't know who I was. They taught me respect. They taught me how to stand in front of people."

Many shared that they had previously felt ashamed of not having matric. Programs helped reframe this absence, sometimes by contextualizing it within health or personal challenges. One youth shared: "I used to feel ashamed that I didn't have my matric. But now I know it was because of the medical condition. It wasn't my fault."

For others, being surrounded by peers with similar experiences reduced the sense of isolation and created a new sense of possibility. As one put it: "The environment just pushed me. And when I saw others doing it, I realized I could too." While these roles were often time bound, the ripple effect of being affirmed, challenged, and connected was long lasting. Several youth mentioned reconnecting with mentors or peers from these programs even years later, seeing these relationships as turning points in their own development.

Informal or family-based work. The most common pathway for these young people was informal work, particularly within family businesses or through community networks. These were not always jobs that youth actively sought. Several initially told us they had no work experience at all. Yet as conversations deepened, it became clear they had contributed in two or three different family businesses in roles they themselves did not categorize as "work." However, when unpacked, these experiences revealed engagement in tasks such as product development, customer service, and even elements of supply chain management. Despite this, participants tended to collapse their contributions under the label of simply "helping out."

One said: "I work like part-time for him — like casual jobs for him — but not like any permanent work like outside of that." Another reflected: "With my mom's work, I was helping with manufacturing. It's real work, but I didn't count it as a job." A third shared: "I was helping with my uncle's flooring business."

These roles were not formally recognized, but they built competencies in customer service, technical skills, timekeeping, and entrepreneurial mindsets. They also allowed those involved to test ideas and explore independence in ways formal employment could not always offer.

Although we cannot examine it in depth here, we observed this cycle across several accounts. It suggested a possible interplay between family-based work and youth development programs that may shape how entrepreneurial skills and community wealth-building can be supported and take root. Whether breaking into permanent roles against the odds, cycling through temporary programs, or contributing to family businesses that they often did not consider "real work," the young people we spoke with found ways to move forward in uneven terrain. Each route carried its own pressures and possibilities, shaped as much by context as by choice.

10 RLabs' GROW Leadership Academy (GLA), a youth development program based in Cape Town, provides young people with digital, entrepreneurial, and leadership training alongside personal development and mentorship. See "Grow Leadership Academy," RLabs, 🔗. Chrysalis Academy, a residential youth development academy in Tokai, Cape Town, offers a three-month holistic program that combines life skills, vocational training, and physical development to help young people build resilience, discipline, and employability. See "About Us," Chrysalis Academy. 🔗

WHAT CLEARED THE PATH

Support took multiple forms. For many, it was less a single decisive intervention than a constellation of people, programs, and personal conviction, woven together in response to need.

People. Family members, particularly parents, were often described as central in sustaining motivation. One young women reflected, "My mom is my role model — she's a wonderful human being and really believes in me." Another explained how encouragement helped her push through challenges: "My parents played a big role in it because they were always the ones that motivated me. They said it's fine that you don't have a matric — we can look at different ways in which you can improve yourself."

Support extended beyond the nuclear family. Aunts, uncles, and community members, including faith-based communities, offered encouragement, resources, or simple reminders of possibility. A young man who became a reading partner described: "I would say she was more like a mentor to me … she actually helped out because she just called me asking are you interested in reading? How invested are you in school kids?" These small acts of recognition often sparked entry points that would otherwise have remained closed.

Programs. Private youth development initiatives emerged as more than just stepping stones; they served as spaces of restoration and affirmation. Participants in RLabs' GROW Leadership Academy and the Chrysalis Academy consistently described these programs as pivotal experiences. At RLabs, many discovered a renewed sense of potential and purpose, realizing that opportunities remained open even without formal qualifications. Those who attended Chrysalis often spoke of gaining self-respect and confidence, learning how to present themselves and engage with others. Even years after completion, many remained in touch with facilitators and peers, viewing those connections as lasting sources of encouragement.

Persistance. Internal resilience was neither automatic nor romanticized — it was often forged through constraint. Whether navigating grief, chronic illness, financial hardship, or caregiving duties, many described a mindset shaped by adaptability and resolve. One young man explained his mindset plainly:

> Another thing about me — like — I'm one person who believes that in any situation there's always a way out, whether it's a setback or a moving forward line. I can just make it easy for me to reach the point — in fact to reach the goal that I have in life.

Others spoke of a quiet determination sparked by external motivators to keep moving forward despite limited options. As one described, "About myself is this. In whatever type of job that I'm doing, I always get interested in how are they doing it — how did they get there?" Even in casual or insecure work, curiosity became a driver of persistence, an active search for learning in environments that might otherwise have felt limiting.

WHAT STOOD IN THE WAY

Even young people's most determined efforts appeared to run up against persistent friction. Barriers were not always dramatic, but their repetition seemed to wear down motivation, erode confidence, and narrow options. What stood in the way was often described not as a lack of willingness, but as a convergence of obstacles, some structural, others emotional, and many less visible.

Gatekeeping and the job market. Across interviews, the formal job market often surfaced as a recurring dead-end. For many, it wasn't just about not having a matric certificate — it was about being locked out of opportunities that demanded experience they had no route to gaining, as one interviewee observed: "For me, the minimum is like matric and like a year of experience also."

Without a way in, effort became circular: applying, being rejected, applying again. The repetition was described as chipping away at self-belief. Roles labelled "entry-level" often weren't. And when people secured roles despite formal disqualification, they still came with an unspoken condition: don't draw attention to your gap. One young man who had landed a call-centre job explained the quiet performance he felt he had to maintain: "As confident as I am and as confident as the world sees me, I'm actually not that confident inside because there's always a constant second guess of I don't have this piece of paper."

Digital exclusion, when combined with economic and social barriers, left some young people structurally disconnected from the very opportunities meant to support them.

Imposter syndrome and internal risk management. In some cases, psychological hesitation, not capacity, determined what came next."Now if I apply for a promotion, they're gonna go back and look at all my paperwork and realize this dude doesn't have matric, and I'm gonna lose my job … So I had to let a lot of opportunities go." The fear of being found out became its own ceiling. Even entry-level transitions could be disorienting, particularly for those who moved straight from school into professional settings.

Mental health and emotional fatigue. Mental health emerged as a central thread in what we heard. The weight of self-doubt, anxiety, and isolation was evident in many stories. Feelings of self-doubt, anxiety, and isolation were described as heavy burdens. For some, this weight took the form of heightened anxiety about the unknown. As one put it:

> I was 17 years old the year before that … what scared me the most. And I'm like, I was sitting in a class with my high-school peers and now I'm standing in a formal office like, what am I doing? … Can someone just hug me and say like, it's going to be fine — you've got this? Unfortunately, life doesn't work that way.

For many, the labour of holding it together while still pushing forward went unnoticed. The absence of mental health support compounded the weight of rejection, academic failure, or simply being left behind, as one young person shared, "You think about the worst-case scenario and your brain goes everywhere. Then you're suicidal. So first fix that within yourself. Be confident."

Timing, information gaps, and missed chances. Some were ready to act, but circumstances or system timing seemed to pose additional hurdles. Missed deadlines, misinformation, or not knowing about a resource until it was too late meant many potential pathways closed before they could be considered. "I tried to register again [for exams] but I was too late. Even when I wrote in May, the results weren't good." In these moments, the problem wasn't motivation but a lack of scaffolding.

Digital exclusion. For others, barriers took the shape of something as ordinary as not having a phone or stable internet access. One participant explained: "I didn't have my own phone. I had to use my cousin's. If they messaged while he was away, I missed it." These small interruptions could become major obstacles, shutting off entire channels of opportunity, such as WhatsApp job groups, program alerts, even call-backs. Digital exclusion, when combined with economic and social barriers, left some young people structurally disconnected from the very opportunities meant to support them.

Rethinking Employment Paths for Deterred Youth

Here we circle back to the question at the heart of this work: how can the employability of youth without high-school qualifications be supported? The answers lie less in neat solutions than in noticing the movements already underway, the ways young people applied when rules said they shouldn't, pieced together experience in family businesses, or drew strength from programs that saw more in them than a missing certificate. From there, the lens widens to consider how these lived tactics resonate with, or fall outside of, formal models and frameworks, and finally, how broader systems might shift if we valued community ties, closed digital gaps, and altered the stories we tell about deterred youth.

For deterred youth, adaptability itself may be one of the most transferable skills.

MICRO-LEVEL: TACTICS IN MOTION

At the micro-level, this research suggests that deterred youth draw on a set of tactics that are deceptively simple but carry weight in practice. One was the decision to apply for jobs even when they did not meet the formal requirements. Several young people described submitting applications despite lacking a matric certificate, and in some cases, such persistence resulted in formal employment. While not always smooth, and many still spoke of imposter syndrome and the constant fear of being "found out," these stories show that bypassing rigid criteria was sometimes possible, especially when a recruiter or manager looked beyond the paperwork.

Other tactics included cycling between short-term program placements and informal family-based businesses, or piecing together part-time roles across sectors. These choices might appear fragmented from the outside, but participants often spoke of them as deliberate attempts to keep moving, to generate income while holding multiple aspirations in play, and to build skill competencies. Taken together, these accounts indicate that employability for deterred youth may rest less on singular breakthroughs and more on persistent, layered improvisation.

Preceding this cycling tactic was reframing informal work as valuable experience. Several young people initially dismissed their contributions to family businesses as "helping out." Yet when prompted, they described managing supply chains, negotiating with customers, and experimenting with products. What they had discounted as chores, on reflection, were entrepreneurial training grounds. Recognizing these experiences as legitimate may help others see that employability can be built outside of formal credentials.

Another tactic was cycling between structured programs and work, whether formal or informal. Programs like RLabs' GROW Leadership Academy and Chrysalis Academy provided skills, networks, and confidence. Some young people left these programs and went straight into temporary placements or family-run businesses, then returned for another round of training. This back-and-forth rhythm suggests that employability is not always linear; it is cultivated over repeated cycles of learning, practice, and reflection.

Finally, there was an emphasis on holding multiple aspirations at once. Many described having plan A, plan B, and sometimes even plan C. This was not necessarily indecision but a strategy of survival in uncertain conditions. For deterred youth, adaptability itself may be one of the most transferable skills.

MESO-LEVEL: PATHWAYS AND MODELS

At the meso-level, where organizations mediate between youth and opportunities, the findings echo and complicate frameworks like Harambee's

pathway model. Harambee, a South African employment accelerator, uses this model to chart the steps that young people take into and through work opportunities. It emphasizes different stages of readiness, transitions between temporary and permanent roles, and the kinds of support that make progress possible.[11]

The overlaps with this research are striking. Both point to nonlinear journeys, where work and training are interwoven and where relationships are as important as technical skills. The Harambee model validates that employability is not a single jump from school to stable work but a series of moves across shifting terrain.

However, there are also gaps. The model, designed at organizational scale, cannot always capture the granular tactics described by young people: redefining family-based work as legitimate experience, or deliberately lowering the stakes by volunteering to build confidence. These strategies suggest that employability may begin even earlier than the model typically assumes, in micro-moments of informal contribution. Where the Harambee model maps structured progression, our study highlights the improvisations that occur in between. Recognizing both layers together, the tactical and the programmatic, may offer a richer way of supporting deterred youth.

MACRO-LEVEL: ORGANIZATIONAL AND SYSTEMIC SHIFTS

At the macro-level, the findings raise questions about how society at large, including policymakers, employers, and the public, thinks about deterred youth. The label of "dropout" frames young people primarily in terms of absence: what they lack, what they failed to complete, what they cannot do. Yet the stories gathered here point toward a different possibility: one in which these youth are recognized for their movement, their resilience, their improvisation, and their community contribution.

Changing the narrative is not only about accurate language, but about reshaping the assumptions that underlie hiring and program design. This may involve redefining what counts as experience. Helping in a home business, coordinating events, or assisting in community enterprises builds tangible skills in communication, problem-solving, execution, and responsibility. Yet these contributions are rarely recognized by formal hiring systems. Expanding hiring criteria to include such experiences is not about lowering standards; it is about aligning them with the diverse ways people actually gain skills.

In this framing, the shift is less about fixing deterred youth and more about questioning the systems that position them as marginal in the first place.

It also means connecting with youth through the channels they actually use. The digital divide, in this sense, is not an abstract issue but a daily barrier that filters who gets seen and who gets left out. Equally important are community networks, which surfaced repeatedly in interviews as the conduits through which opportunities, encouragement, and validation flowed. Valuing these ties, rather than relying solely on formal systems or digital platforms, may expand access in ways that are both more inclusive and more durable. In this framing, the shift is less about fixing deterred youth and more about questioning the systems that position them as marginal in the first place.

Importantly, there is a need to replace static entry requirements with learning pathways. The "matric plus experience" formula locks out millions by design. Embedding learning into entry-level roles, whether through apprenticeships, probationary training, or adaptive evaluation methods, could enable wider access and substance.

11 Harambee Youth Employment Accelerator, *Pathway Management Framework* (Johannesburg: Harambee, August 2025).

Finally, mental health and belonging surfaced as structural needs. Youth development programs provided more than technical skills; they restored confidence and dignity. The implication is that employment support must be designed as much for restoration as for equipping. Without replenishment, resilience eventually runs dry.

LIMITATIONS AND FUTURE RESEARCH

While this study offers valuable insights, it is important to note its limitations. It was cross-sectional, based on one-time online interviews with a small group of seven young people from Cape Town's Cape Flats. As such, the findings cannot be generalized to all youth deterred from completing high school.

Future research could build on this work in several ways. Longitudinal studies could track how these pathways evolve over time. Comparative research might examine how youth in other South African regions, or in different socioeconomic contexts, navigate similar challenges. A gendered lens could also yield important insights, as the intersection of gender and schooling likely shapes pathways in specific ways.

In addition, the interplay between family-based businesses and youth development programs warrants further exploration. While not a central focus of this study, the combination appeared in several interviews. Future work might test whether this combination could serve as a training ground for entrepreneurial skills, breaking cycles of poverty (or feeding cycles of wealth), and strengthening community-level economies.

What emerges here is not a formula but a reminder: employability is being forged daily, often against the grain of existing systems. Small acts of persistence, whether sending an application or learning through informal work, show that young people are already reaching. Frameworks like Harambee's help to map possibilities, but they are incomplete without the voices of those moving through them in myriad ways. At a wider level, supporting employability means changing the way youth without qualifications are seen, less as a deficit to fix, and more as contributors whose ingenuity deserves recognition. To build systems that serve them better, the work must meet them where they are, in the spaces and strategies they have already created.

Lessons Learned: Young People Are Already Moving

This research began with a question about how to support the employability of youth without high-school qualifications. The answer turns out to be more complex and more hopeful than expected. These young people weren't sitting around waiting to be rescued. They were already in motion, applying for jobs, building skills, contributing to their communities, and creating their own definitions of success. The challenge isn't reaching them — it's extending *their* reach. It's removing the barriers that limit their movement and recognizing the value they're already creating for themselves and their communities.

While individual tactics matter, they can't solve structural problems. Young people shouldn't have to apply for dozens of jobs to get one interview. They shouldn't have to hide their educational backgrounds or live in fear of being discovered. Real change requires shifts in how we think about qualifications, experience, and potential. It means questioning why entry-level jobs require experience, why family business work doesn't count as real experience, and why we continue to use deficit language about young people who have overcome extraordinary challenges.

The dominant story about young people without high-school diplomas focuses on what they lack. This research suggests a different narrative: these

are resourceful individuals who have learned to navigate complex systems with limited support. They have developed skills that formal education often fails to teach: adaptability, resilience, creativity, problem-solving, and the ability to create opportunity from constraint. These are exactly the qualities that employers claim to value and the 21st-century world of work requires.

The question isn't whether these young people can contribute — they're already contributing. The question is whether our systems are flexible enough to recognize and build on what they bring. Supporting deterred youth isn't about fixing broken individuals, it's about building more responsive systems. This means:

- Employers who evaluate potential rather than just credentials
- Programs that address emotional barriers alongside skills gaps
- Policies that recognize diverse pathways to competence
- Communities that celebrate unconventional routes to success.

Most importantly, it means listening to young people themselves. They are the experts on their own experiences and the best guides to what actually works. The seven young people who shared their stories with us weren't waiting for permission to build their futures. They were already building them, one application, one volunteer shift, one family business contribution at a time. Our job isn't to save them — it's to get out of their way, support them, and create conditions where their movement can flourish.

Research Team

Natasha Haffajee is a researcher and practitioner whose work explores how identity and place shape youth agency in unequal urban contexts. She brings over 15 years of experience as an SABPP-certified people practices leader, with a focus on youth empowerment, social justice, and inclusive innovation. Natasha currently serves as a research fellow with the London School of Economics' Social Innovation Lab for Human Flourishing, researcher and global panelist with the Reach Alliance, consultant to the Bertha Centre for Social Innovation and Entrepreneurship, and trustee and impact lead of the South African PBO Great Girls. She holds an MPhil in Inclusive Innovation, awarded with distinction by the UCT Graduate School of Business, and is preparing for doctoral research on youth pathways.

Sikelelwe Mtshizana is a corporate intelligence analyst, researcher, and master's candidate in international relations at the University of Cape Town, where her thesis examines inconsistencies in South Africa's foreign policy and decision-making processes. She earned her undergraduate degree with distinction in politics, governance, and sociology, and holds an honours degree with distinction in comparative foreign policy, both from the University of Cape Town. Sikelelwe has collaborated with faculty from the Massachusetts Institute of Technology and the University of Cambridge on research projects and serves as graduate advisor for the Golden Key International Honour Society. As a former YOUNGA delegate, her work has focused on co-creating inclusive strategies that advance youth empowerment, expand access, and promote agency.

Wenbo Zheng is a seasoned chartered accountant with over a decade of experience, combining financial expertise with a strong commitment to social impact. A corporate leader and entrepreneur at heart, she has led finance teams across the audit, fintech, marketing, and renewable energy sectors in Sub-Saharan Africa, while also building and supporting initiatives that promote the circular economy. As a Bertha Scholar, she earned her MPhil in inclusive innovation with distinction from the Graduate School of Business at the University of Cape Town, where her research examined how decision factors influencing mobile money interoperability shape inclusive innovation. Her work, including contributions to the London School of Economics' Social Innovation Lab, focuses on translating rigorous research into practical solutions that advance financial inclusion and empower marginalized communities.

Solange Rosa is director of the Bertha Centre for Social Innovation and Entrepreneurship and the Solution Space at the Graduate School of Business, University of Cape Town (UCT) in South Africa. She has also been an independent public policy and strategy consultant in public policy, human rights, social innovation, public sector innovation, and development. Her clients include international organizations, national and provincial government departments, academic institutions, nongovernment organizations, and philanthropic foundations. She has taught on executive education and MBA programs at the UCT Graduate School of Business and the UCT School of Economics. She has a doctorate in constitutional law from the University of Stellenbosch and a master's degree in law from the University of Cape Town. Previously she was chief director of policy and strategy in the Premier's Department of the Western Cape Government.

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