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Technical Vocational Education and Training (TVET) to Empower Secondary School Learners from Low Socioeconomic Backgrounds

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Abstract: Low Socioeconomic Status (SES) predisposes one to vulnerability as it entangles many challenges such as financial and low opportunities. Youths from low socioeconomic backgrounds often encounter steep adversities that may potentially halt their educational pursuits. Without the right and necessary empowerment coined as skill development within the high school system, these youths may remain vulnerable to poverty, socially reliant and dependent on government support and grants. Therefore, the researchers propose a paradigm shift in the South African educational system to ensure that these learners do not lag in their learning. An effective program that will target their academic and practical skills needs is necessary to motivate them to learn and empower them to achieve financial independence, self-reliance, and productivity. Skills development in TVET will be the glue between their education and the world of work for these learners. Thus, the purpose of the study was to advocate for TVET provision as an empowering tool to elevate the Socioeconomic Status of the learners from a low socioeconomic background at a Johannesburg school. The target population was youths from a low socioeconomic background. The sample size was determined by availability of participants and manpower, thus the seven participants used whom were all from a school that caters for vulnerable learners. A purposive sampling was enforced for accurate representation of the population. Data collected through qualitative methods were properly analysed through thematic analysis. The findings of this study indicate a need for implementation and acquisition of skills through Technical Vocational Education and Training (TVET) to break the chain of poverty and propel these youths to a better future and more fulfilled lives.

Keywords: Empowering learner, poverty, TVET, vulnerable, dropout, vocational stream

1.   Introduction

Socioeconomic Status (SES) is a major determinant of life outcomes in different spheres. In order words, SES is an indicator of opportunity, resources, information, and life direction. Destin, Han, Bilontempo, Tipton and Yeager (2019) postulated that socioeconomic contexts influence youths' experiences and the understanding of themselves and the opportunities available to them. For learners from high SES, opportunities are readily available compared to their counterparts from low SES. This indicates that opportunities available to an individual can either be expanded or decreased by their SES. Robinson (2015) defined SES as a term used to describe people's social class using a combination of educational qualification, geographical location, occupation, and level of income as a yardstick. Socioeconomic Status (SES) is a person's financial level or capability which determines what they can afford. Individuals from low socioeconomic backgrounds are exposed to poverty which predisposes them to vulnerability. According to Ferreira (2016), vulnerability is "broad and denotes the individual's exposure to risk and the predisposition to experience risk" (p. 162). Youths from vulnerable backgrounds face various challenges, including

disruption of their education and lack of skills acquisition. Shava and Clementine (2016) analysed that the major reasons for skill deficits in South Africa are amongst others, a lack of investment in skills development and education.

The South African basic school system only has one stream. The public school system is mainly focused on the academic stream where 'one size fits all' is applied. Unlike their counterparts, there is no classification of education for learners at the secondary school level. Aside from special schools for learners with learning difficulties, South African secondary education favours the academic stream where the criteria for entry and completion are that the learner must be educated and excludes the practical or vocational stream. There is no due consideration for learners from vulnerable backgrounds whose family circumstances predispose them to unfavourable educational outcomes. In other words, with their family background, these youths are saddled with the risk of stunted education, regardless of whether they are academically fit or not. According to Spaull (2015), "The poor quality of education that learners receive helps drive an intergenerational cycle of poverty where children inherit the social standing of their parents or caregivers, irrespective of their abilities or effort" (p. 34). In other words, with all their academic ability, these youths end up wallowing in abject poverty. Fix, Ritzen, Pieters, and Kuiper (2019) emphasised that these learners have the intellectual capacity to succeed academically, but may not, due to their backgrounds that are characterised by the low SES of their families.

Socioeconomic Status (SES) correlates with poverty which significantly influences one's school experience, positively or negatively. In the latter, the learner becomes frustrated and discouraged, adopting a negative attitude towards school. As Kennewell, Curtis, Maher, Luddy, and Virgara (2022) reported, learners from higher SES stay in school longer than those learners from low SES. Poon (2020) expatiated that those individuals from low SES may get lower grades than their fellow learners from higher SES. Congruently, Broer, Bai, and Fonseca (2019) added that low educational attainment is connected to low SES. Further, low educational attainment and SES have a mutual influence on each other. As earlier stated, SES plays a decisive role in school demotivation, consequently increasing the tendency of individuals to terminate their education prematurely, thereby influencing their academic and skill acquisition opportunities. Cosgun Ögeyik (2016) pointed to demotivation as one of the problems faced by learners from low SES in their school process. This poses a hindrance and can deprive them of the opportunity to maximise their potential and become financially independent, hence the call for change in the education system with elements of diversification and actual inclusivity.

International organisations such as UNESCO (Chamadia & Shahid, 2018) emphasised the importance of integrating vocational streams into secondary school curricula. School-based Technical Vocational Education and Training (TVET) will introduce primary skills essential for the growing child, thereby laying the foundation for further learning. Oketch (2014) reported that the variation of TVET at the high school level is determined by the nation's needs. However, lower and higher secondary education levels are phases that are very crucial in youths' lives. This is because youths can decide to discontinue their education at either of the phases voluntarily or due to external pressure. Maclean and Pavlova (2013) described the vocationalisation of secondary school as the "process of including practical skills in the educational process" (p. 46). In other words, skills acquisition is integrated into general education, and this equips learners and prepares them for both learning and work. Mathur, Sharan, Chakraborty, and Mullick (2022) explained that TVET is much preferred because it exposes youths to the labour market through skills acquisition or furthering of higher education.

The emphasis on innovation in the education system is partially linked to the global economic decline. This dire need is because the traditional kind of learning, which Okocha (2009, p. 83) called the "grammar type of education", is no longer sufficient to face the individual and economic challenges trending worldwide. According to Yeap, Suhaimi and Nasir (2021), vocational education empowers students for the world of work better than just academic education. Agreeably, the kind of education that is attuned to both theoretical and practical skills acquisition that TVET represents should be prioritised. Invariably, TVET plays a complementary role and broadens learning beyond what currently exists in the school system. According to Chinedu and Olabiyi (2015), TVET ensures the social inclusion of youths from diverse educational and SES and provides vocational skills for productive livelihoods. Alhasan and Tyabo (2013) concurred that TVET is the "only way to prepare young people for the world of work which reaches out to the marginalized and excluded groups to engage them in income-generating livelihoods" (p. 150). TVET is an option that can improve the livelihoods of learners from vulnerable backgrounds.

According to Hashim and Ibrahim (2010, p. 58), the flexibility and diverse nature of TVET enable it to meet the "global initiative of Education for all, Second chance Education, Lifelong Learning and Equity Education." A report from the findings of Chamadia and Shahid (2018) showed that in countries like Pakistan, there is a higher demand for youths with secondary education and technical and vocational education for various trade activities than people with a tertiary level of education with just managerial skills. Countries like Australia, Indonesia, India, China, and Bangladesh have adopted the vocational stream in secondary education (Pavlova & Maclean, 2013). Integrating TVET into the school curriculum will ensure that it is available, accessible, and reachable to all. The transformation of a financial system should indeed start from the grassroots and be based on individual empowerment. Inculcating this dual system in South African secondary education may seem unrealistic, but its long-term benefits will be of inestimable value if implemented. Just as Chanrithy and Bang (2021) stated, the crucial role played by TVET is usually evident in a nation's social-economic development. Although the South African government according to Khoza (2021) has devised

strategies of vocationalisation of education for skills creation and workmanship, however, this is based on the college level. Leaners from low socioeconomic backgrounds are still mostly excluded from skills acquisition.

Acquiring skills that are embodied in the concept of TVET (Cavanagh, Shaw, & Wang, 2013) is considered necessary. In UNESCO's definition, TVET is seen as "those aspects of educational processes involving, in addition to general education, the study of technologies and related sciences and the acquisition of practical skills, attitudes, understanding, and knowledge relating to occupation" (Tripney & Hombrados, 2013, p. 2). TVET programmes are designed to provide practical and continued learning and exposure to career options and can be described as an evolutionary education to provide and expand opportunities for the youth and prepare them for the world of work. In South Africa, TVET institution is formally known as Further Education and Training (FET), and it is provided at the college level. According to the Department of Higher Education and Training (2013), there are 50 public technical and vocational education and training colleges, and they are responsible for providing skills development mostly in colleges (Akoojee, 2009). Simon, Pauline, and José-Luis (2014) reported that there is a current plan in South Africa to expand the TVET college system to 2.5 million enrolments by 2030. Historically, the "establishment in 2009 of the new ministry of post-school education and training, the Department of Higher Education and Training saw increased attention to TVET" (Akoojee, 2016, p. 7). The reason as purported by Rauner and Maclean (2009) is that South Africa amongst other countries views TVET as an influential tool for economic growth (cited in Wedekind, 2016). Khoza (2021) reported that South African youths are faced with the problem of skill development which influences the national unemployment rate. This is the main reason why TVET should be included in the school curriculum.

The vital contribution of TVET is projected to empower individuals and enhance economic development. TVET is widely embraced as the vehicle that drives individual and systemic changes. As Wang (2012) stated, it is enshrined in the right to education and the right to work in international human rights instruments. TVET ensures that the objective of national development is achieved because it is more inclusive, it is future-oriented in that it enables skills acquisition that is specific and attuned to an individual's potential or talent. In other words, TVET is a steppingstone towards one's career pursuit; it is assistive in that it helps confirm if a career aspiration is in line with one's strengths. With this attribution, it is broader and more unique than traditional education. Correspondingly, TVET is a deliberate education intervention designed to instil in learners the essential skills required to make them more productive and effective in diverse areas of economic activity (Raimi & Akhuemonkhan, 2014). It is cultivated and heightens social and financial independence, and as Wang (2012) said, it is suitable for both the developed and developing world. Though the benefit of TVET is enormous for countries that have implemented it successfully, people's orientation towards it in some African countries is still inferior. Ismail and Mohammed (2015) stated that people often consider TVET a second-class education compared to its counterparts. This negative perception could affect the provision of TVET. Oketch (2014) emphasised devising ways to integrate TVET with general education and vice versa so that it is not seen as second best. Raimi and Akhuemonkhan (2014) reiterated that TVET is a crucial skill-oriented education geared towards employability and national development. According to Oviawe, Uwameiye, and Uddin (2017), TVET harnesses the creative and manipulative potentials of individuals for the benefit of humanity. It will ensure skills distribution, a high level of productivity, and personal and national growth and empowerment. TVET can inspire people towards a better life by providing them with the necessary skills to achieve their aspirations (Chinedu & Olabiyi, 2015). Although the role and significance of TVET are undeniable, Tripney and Hombrados (2013) emphasised that it may not create additional employment, instead, it increases the advantage of becoming employed. In conclusion, TVET has socioeconomic benefits and potential for all.

Therefore, the purpose of this study is to advocate for TVET provision as an empowering tool to elevate the SES of vulnerable youths in the South African context so that they can be financially independent and contribute to the society that they are part of.

Thus, the following research questions were raised:

- In what way does the South African education system meet the skills aspirations of youths with low socioeconomic backgrounds?
- How does low socioeconomic background relate to early school leaving, affecting career aspirations and skills needs for these youths?

2.   Theoretical Framework

Juntunen and Wettersten (2006) saw the need to incorporate Snyder's Hope theory in the context of work. Work hope is one of the variables embedded in the domain-specific hope of Snyder's belief levels of abstraction. Medvide and Maureen (2020) stated that work hope is an extension of Snyder and colleagues' theory by describing the mutual relationship between pathways and agency in the vocational context. Work hope increases the effort that is put into the activities that lead to career achievement. Kenny, Walsh-Blair, Blustein, Bempechat, and Seltzer (2010) posited that work hope initiates positive attitudes towards academic and career planning. Medvide and Maureen (2020, 301) defined work hope "as a positive motivational state specifically within the vocational domain and characterized by the ability to plan and the motivation to carry out steps to achieve work-related goals". In other words, work hope enables

individuals to plan and devise the necessary means towards career attainment. Therefore, work hope is referred to as a support and achievement belief (Kenny et al., 2010). According to the findings of Diemer and Blustein's (2007) study, vocational (work) hope has a considerable tie to the work lives of urban adolescents. However, work hope is beneficial to everyone.

In Thompson, Her and Nitzarim's (2014) findings, work hope is considered relevant for individuals from disenfranchised groups. Their result pointed out the advantage of the use of work hope for students who are members of underrepresented ethnic groups. Contributing, the result of Diemer and Blustein's (2007) research on the vocational development of urban adolescents in the United States showed that vocational (work) hope is very important to their career development (cited in Yakushko & Sokolova, 2010) There has not been any research on how work-hope could benefit learners from low SES in the South African context. Learners from low SES in South Africa rely on the academic stream as the only route to career development which was pointed out as problematic as they may not be able to attain their career due to financial constraints. Juntunen and Wettersten (2006) suggested that work hope provided a better understanding of the vocational needs of the disenfranchised population. It is believed by the researchers that work hope could be very significant for the research participants whose hope for further education seems to be tainted by social and economic barriers. Medvide and Maureen (2020) considered work hope a viable interventional option that will help disenfranchised learners transcend whatever barrier that negatively impacts their career decision and pursuit. This said, work hope will resonate with the vulnerable and at-risk youth because it will enable them to work hard in their academic tasks, knowing full well the positive impact on their future career.

3.   Methodology

The researchers followed certain procedures to conduct and analyse their data which are discussed as follows. A qualitative method was used to obtain the subjective opinions of the research participants on their skills needs. Christensen, Johnson, and Turner (2011) posited that a qualitative approach entail collecting personal data and investigating participants in a particular context. The interest was in the skills needs of learners from low socioeconomic backgrounds. This approach enabled a meaningful understanding through the language and words of the participants. Phrased differently, conducting qualitative research enabled the researchers to enter the world of these vulnerable youths and build trust with them using qualitative aspects such as experience, meaning, and understanding.

3.1.1 Rationale

Learners from low SESs' skills needs are neglected and these learners are the ones that need this empowerment to lead stable lives. To get raw data, subjective opinions and information were deemed necessary to come from the participants themselves, thus the use of the qualitative method for data collection.

3.1.2 Qualitative Approach

The researchers made use of qualitative interviews, the use of collages and group discussions to collect data. This was to ensure that rich and detailed information is collected through the participants' interpretation of their skills needs.

3.2 Population and Sample

To ensure an accurate representation of the research population, the samples were selected from a school in Johannesburg that caters to vulnerable youths. These youths were all from low socioeconomic backgrounds (some parents were not educated, and some were graduates, truck drivers, tailors, domestic workers, single parents, orphaned, unemployed parents, security guards, housewives) and striving to survive. Some are immigrants and some are indigenous to South Africa. The researchers approached the school and made their intentions known; the school authority allowed the researchers to approach the learners. They showed interest and obtained consent from their parents and guardians. These participants were all in grade 9 at the time of the interview and they were all Black. They were from diverse backgrounds and of different ages ranging from 14 to 17 years at the time of the interview.

The sample consisted of seven participants: four boys and three girls. The intention was to interview eight learners, however, one of the girls was not available on the day of the interview. The focus of this research required purposive sampling. According to Christensen et al. (2011), in purposive sampling, individuals with relevant characteristics were identified, in this case, youth from low SES. The purpose of this study required that the participants possess specific characteristics which were selected at the researchers' discretion. According to Goldberg and Allen (2015), it is essential to describe the features of the sample, and in this case, the participants were all from families of low SES and were made vulnerable by their family situations. The selection criteria stipulated that the learners must be in Grade 9, available to participate, and willing to do so. (Table 1).

Table 1-Participants' sex, age, grade and social class

Participants	Sex	Age	Grade	Social class
Participant A	M	14 years	9	Low SES
Participant B	M	16 years	9	Low SES
Participant C	M	17 years	9	Low SES
Participant D	M	14 years	9	Low SES
Participant A	F	17 years	9	Low SES
Participant B	F	15 years	9	Low SES
Participant C	F	17 years	9	Low SES

M - Male; F - Female

3.3 Data Collection

Primary data which were collected through career collage compilations, group discussions, and individual interviews were used.

3.3.1 Career Collage

The first session entailed compilations of career collages. It is described by Fritz and Beckman (2007) as a form of pictorial storytelling (adapted from Robinson, 2015). A collage is a visual symbol used in this case to exhibit career aspirations and skills needs. The participants used this to describe and express their career and skills needs and desires.

3.3.2 Group Discussion

After the participants compiled their respective colleges, the next session was to engage in a group discussion of their collages, with one of the researchers chairing and directing the session. To formalise the discussion, semi-structured questions were prepared, however, the researcher was flexible in that follow-up questions were asked which were induced by previous answers. This procedure allowed for freedom of expression and contribution as the participants were prompted to add and generate more responses to either their previous responses or to another person. Participants produced the meaning and interpretation of the content of their collages. The questions asked revolved around skills, needs, and career aspirations which are important aspects of this research. Each participant was able to express their skills needs and career aspirations. The interviews were recorded and transcribed.

3.3.3 Individual Interview

An interview enables personal contact between interviewer and interviewee which takes place at a designated space and time and allows for the participants to tell their stories themselves. Semi-structured interviews were deemed relevant and more suitable in this context because it was purposive research. According to Terre Blanche, Durrheim, and Painter (2006), semi-structured interviews are the most popular and allow one to develop an interview schedule, namely the research questions beforehand. It also gave the researchers some structure. This session enabled the researchers to get to know the participants personally and gain information about their backgrounds, home environments, and family situations. They talked about the occupations of their parents and siblings and their educational experiences and divulged information such as where they originated or migrated from and where they currently reside. This helped to discover their skills needs and provided a holistic grasp of factors that could influence the participants' career intentions. Both the group discussion and individual interviews were semi-structured. Semi-structured interviews guided our conversations and allowed the participants the freedom to discuss their career and skills interests (Hesse-Biber & Leavy, 2017). This process set the participants at ease and enabled the flow of information.

Table 2 - Summary of career collages and discussion for the boys

Participants	A	B	C	D
1st career choice	Policeman	Teacher	Scientist	Engineer
2nd choice (Sports)	Cricketer Soccer player	Soccer player Goalkeeper	Soccer player Boxer	Rugby player
3rd choice (Art)	Actor Cartoonist		Singer (rapper)	Singer
Skills possessed	Drawing Spray painting Acting, Painting	Soccer skills	Making computer Building things	Wiring Fixing things

Table 2- Continue

Personal Skills needed	Electrician Technician	Painting	Drawing Acting	Electrical and Technical
Parents' skills	Sewing (Dad & Mum)	Cooking (Mum) Soccer skills (Dad)	Sewing (Mum)	Sewing (Mum)
Skills needed for school	Things that have to do with electricity	Spray painting Painting, Chef Building Sports	Drama Acting	How to connect things Sports

Table 3 - Summary of career collages and discussion for the girls

Participant	A	B	C
1st career choice	Journalist	Psychologist	Pediatrician Gynaecologist
2nd & 3rd choices (Art)	Designer Stylist	Homemaker Interior decorator	Soccer player
Skills possessed	Sewing How to combine wears	Drawing Can decorate	
Personal Skills needed	Drawing How to design	How to merge colours	Exposure to human anatomy Training in first aid
Parents' skills	Cooking and baking (Mum)	Baking	Cooking and baking (Mum)
Skills needed for school	Sewing Modelling	Tailoring Drawing How to measure	Practical exposure to human anatomy

Table 4 - Relatedness of skills to career aspirations

Participants	Career Skills
Boy participant A	Cartoonist-----------------------Drawing Painting Spray painting Actor------------------------------Acting
Boy participant C	Scientist-------------------------Making the computer (invent)
Boy participant D	Engineer-------------------------Wiring & fixing cars
Girl participant A	Designer-------------------------Can draw Can sew Stylist---------------------------- Can combine clothes
Girl participant B	Interior designer----------------Can decorate

3.4 Data Analysis

Terre Blanch et al. (2006) postulated that there is no clear demarcation between data collection and analysis, rather there is a gradual diminishing of one and the waxing of the other. In other words, there is a smooth transition from data collection to data analysis. The data were analysed qualitatively. Both the group discussion of the collages and individual interviews were transcribed verbatim. This stage was crucial because it added value and meaning to the purpose of the study. The data were thoroughly analysed and categorised. When going through the data, the researchers searched for and identified themes inherent in the data after which they filtered them to use those themes that augured well with the research purpose. Many studies have acknowledged the relevance and usefulness of thematic analysis in a qualitative analysis method. According to Braun and Clarke (2006), this technique is more suitable because it helped the researchers to identify, analyse, and report patterns (themes) within data. Thematic data analysis provided a rich, detailed description and organisation of data and enabled the researchers to find ways that helped in planning and recommending.

4. Results

After the analyses of the data, various themes were extracted.

4.1 Themes

The themes that emerged were from the analysis of the individual collages, group discussion, and individual interviews collectively. Recurring themes that were linked to the research purpose were selected. According to Terre Blanche et al. (2006), themes should ideally arise naturally from the data, but at the same time, they should also have a bearing on one's research question. Therefore, the themes used are lack of an enabling environment, skill aspiration, skill needs, career aspiration, factors affecting career aspiration and skill needs of youths from low socio-economic status. These themes are obtained from the research questions, and during the interview and focus group discussion, the participants raised them. To provide a comprehensive picture, the themes were first presented as a header, merged into two broad themes, and used as a subtopic (4.1.1 and 4.1.2). Then under the themes, the participants' opinions and perspectives ensued. The researchers endeavoured as much as possible to present the research participants' words verbatim which are written in italic. Maintaining the integrity of our participants' words attest to the authenticity of the research because they are the co-authors in telling the story in the data (Goldberg & Allen, 2015). However, slight adjustments were made in brackets to promote understanding as the English language is a borrowed language for the researchers and the participants.

4.1.1 Enabling Environment - Meets Learners' Educational Needs

This is one of the two broad themes that emerged from the research questions and what the participants said. The participants believed that their educational context does not provide the appropriate and rightful support that meets their educational needs. One of the things they mentioned is that the school subjects were not related to their skills needs. In the collage of boy participant D, he wrote subject and school as challenges to his career. This participant added *"And my school doesn't have those practical activities"*, correlating to his collage. Another participant also mentioned subject matter in his individual interview as a challenge. Boy participant A said, *"There is no like subject that I need to be an artist, so I have to change subjects, then maybe by those subjects I could come up with another career"*. Participant B also added, *"Yeah, here we don't have sports, and like, if you wanna be a soccer player, you have to practice"*. He also wrote the phrase –*"school, we don't have sport"*. Agreeing with that, one of the girl participants stated: *"We don't actually have them, so that's one of the bad things, that's it. Cause we don't have something like we can, like something like sewing and all that, maybe to express our inner arts, we don't have such things. We don't have sports here; we don't have something"*. So, it is true that there is no system in place to support these learners, however, the school as part of a whole of the education system can only do as much, determined by what is at their disposal.

4.1.2 Family Circumstances - to School Dropout - Lack of Skills Acquisition

The family situation has a great impact on academic achievements and educational outcomes. It was obvious that most of these participants came from unfavourable family situations. For instance, when one of the participants was asked why he chose to be a scientist, he replied *"because it's a career that I like to do but I don't know what is gonna happen in future"*. He further attributed the above possible negative outcome to a lack of money. This participant also stated in the group discussion when he was asked what could hinder him from achieving his dream that *"maybe is money to go to university to learn to do this (a scientist)"*. The verbal repetition of this challenge by this participant could possibly mean he considered a lack of money a huge stumbling block to his education. This statement is supported by other participants' statements *"It will be a problem because, sometimes like, we don't have money for maybe if we're supposed to go to Newcastle (home), they'll have to borrow money"*. In participant C's individual interview, he echoed *"there are so many challenges I come from"*. As a result of these unsolicited challenges, these participants were uncertain about their educational future. In pursuit, other participants also referred to the possibility of not going to university. In the individual interviews, one of the boy participants hinted at finances as a possible obstacle to progressing to university, correlating to his collage content in which he more than once wrote money as a challenge. One of the boy participants also wrote "money for university" as a challenge. This participant in the group discussion said, *"Maybe like, like am from a poor family"*. This concept was also reinforced in this individual's interview: *"So like some people, like me, we don't have a lot of money for going to university"*. The use of the phrase *"some people like me"* by this participant could mean he has placed himself into a category and social class, with acceptance of the notion of the outcome for such people. The other boy participant in the group discussion said money is a challenge. One of the girl participants also added "*Like family, if they don't have money, maybe I can drop out*". These uncertainties are due to these participants' family circumstances.

5. Discussion

In addressing the research questions, 'In what way does the South African education system meet the aspirations of youths from low socioeconomic backgrounds?' and 'How do low socioeconomic background relate to early school leaving, affecting career aspirations and skills needs for these youths?', this study has established that the South African education system does not cater for the needs of youths from low socioeconomic backgrounds; thus, integrating TVET into the mainstream curriculum is welcomed by the participants. It also found that family circumstances could be a contributing factor to early school leaving hence truncated career aspirations and skills acquisition.

For a beneficial skills development outcome, Palmer (2005) pointed out the importance of enabling environments surrounding skills development. Formal education as one of the enabling environments should have, amongst other things, appropriate school infrastructure that includes workshops, learning materials such as tools and equipment, and a relevant curriculum (Palmer, 2007). Wright (2012) also highlighted the need for building support within the school environment. According to Palmer (2007), an enabling environment has a direct influence on the extent to which quality skills are developed by the learners. It was evident that the school environment does not support the skills needs of these youth. Kingombe (2012) emphasised that the task of education to fulfil high hopes for success is formidable. He further argued that to resolve the many challenges facing the education system, the idea should be an implementation of change and not the repetition of what currently exists. Hughes (2005) elaborated that in schools today, it is much the same as it was 20 years ago, with the same teaching styles, the same subjects, the same lesson plans, even the same examinations, which ought not to be so. Though this may be a bit exaggerated, the South African educational system seems not to meet up with the demand for change, especially for the vulnerable youth who need support to target their unique skills needs. In other words, these youth are in dire need of skills programmes that are tailored to engage, enable, and empower them in their educational journey. Lamb (2011) concluded that work-based skills-focused learning environments provided in TVET encourage the participation of individuals who may not otherwise engage in education. A notion concurred by the participants and Horgan (2007), who acknowledged that learning becomes positive when it is comprised of doing. One of the girl participants said: *"It will have a good effect on the learner, because when you bring something, a skill, mostly we like working with something, with our hands. Something creative, something like, is not like reading. You see, you get bored with books and all that"*. In unison, these participants agreed that practical learning would keep them engaged and motivated, they could visualise skills as instrumental to their learning. As one of the major stakeholders in educational settings, Ananiadou (2013) advised that it is often appropriate to understand educational needs in terms of groups of learners to determine priorities and target interventions. Kingombe (2012) agreed that the most common type of intervention for youth is skills training. These participants' sentiments support this.

Secondly, the family factor may constitute a stumbling block in attaining one's education, however, Yohalem and Pittman (2001) postulated that they never completely dampen young people's desire to make a better life for themselves. This is so true for the research participants. They considered education important and had healthy career aspirations. This proves that, notwithstanding their circumstances, they did not start out expecting little from life, instead their dreams and aspiration were not dissimilar to any other children (Horgan, 2007). With this said, there is a clear gap between aspiration and achievement. Horgan (2007) stated that for children from families living in poverty, their understanding and experience of school is narrow, and they cannot be sure of having a good education. Most of the participants voiced the possibility of not going to university because of their families' financial constraints. According to the findings by Gutman, Schoon and Sabates (2012), adolescents from lower socioeconomic backgrounds reported lower school motivation. This sentiment was evident and shared by the participants. These youth presumed that their education may be hindered and one of the factors associated with this uncertainty was family background (Gutman et al., 2012). Brooks-Gunn and Duncan (1997) stated that children cannot alter family conditions by themselves, at least until they approach adulthood. The family circumstance is a possible determinant of one's educational outcome. In other words, the research participants' family background could determine if they furthered their studies to pursue their careers or even complete their education, an outcome that may be detrimental to their future and career aspiration and skills acquisition. In summary, it was ascertained that these participants had skills needs that were relevant to their career choices. However, because of their family backgrounds, their aspirations may not be actualised.

6. Conclusion

This study shows that vulnerable youths have skills needs that have been neglected. Traditional academic education does not adequately meet their practical skills needs. Exposure to practical training would broaden vulnerable youths' understanding and knowledge of skills and career development. In contrast, excluding skills training for these youths may douse potential, talent, and creativity. Agencies and policymakers must seek out potent ways to empower these youths for their benefit and that of the nation. It is important to state that in South Africa, there is no infrastructure in place nor trained teachers to support the implementation of TVET in the secondary school setting; these resources are needed to enable TVET's successful implementation at this level. Wallenborn and Heyneman (2009) argued that

without these viable resources in a traditional secondary school, TVET programmes would not have an economic impact and would not create employability for learners.

TVET is highlighted as the best instrument to achieve this aim as it could provide these youths with valuable skills to either be self-reliant or, better skill, be employed. It is inclusive and has the potential to engage them in learning and draw them back to school. Vulnerable youth need to acquire some technical and vocational skills to ensure that they are productive. Aside from the growth and productivity evident in TVET, it embodies inclusion and broadens opportunities (Kingombe, 2012) and is a platform needed by vulnerable youth to explore skills/career needs. At this junction, it is appropriate to say that although TVET may be of great value, it may not necessarily meet the skills needs of every vulnerable youth (Bradley, Lansing, & Stagner, 2013). However, Lamb (2011) reinforced the research finding that people from lower socioeconomic backgrounds, amongst others, make use of opportunities in TVET more than other forms of education to enhance their labour market prospects.

According to the researchers' knowledge, there is limited research on TVET for youths from low socioeconomic backgrounds in the South African context. Therefore, it is our opinion that this research study will add to the knowledge reservoir about the role of TVET in ensuring skills acquisition for these youths. The major contribution is that these findings could be used to make inferences about the needs of other vulnerable and at-risk learners outside the present study area. Secondly, this study makes an empirical contribution by proving insights into the intervention needs of the youth from low socioeconomic backgrounds. One of the strengths of this research includes the use of qualitative methods to derive data. This approach allowed the provision of subjective and authentic information from the participants on their skills needs, derived through open-ended questions and free flow of information through collages. This is considered a strength because the participants were the voice, and their perspectives gave meaning to this research. The qualitative analysis of the data collected could help in advocating for the implementation/ introduction of skills programmes for vulnerable and at-risk youth. In other words, it can inform government policy.

In more primitive times, skills acquisition was considered highly important and a must for youngsters. That was why every clan ensured that they passed down skills to the next generation. Currently, skills development has returned to many nations' agendas. Contrarily, in South Africa, there is no specific skills intervention programme for those academically sound learners at the secondary school level that face socioeconomic challenges – this might limit or hinder their potential and further education. TVET would play an essential role in our education system by promoting literacy, unlocking potential, and increasing work opportunities. In addition to motivating continued and quick learning, TVET will also provide the knowledge and practical skills to empower vulnerable youth, connect them to productive work, and improve the quality of their lives. TVET will be an effective tool in enriching the lives of these youths. While not all vulnerable youths will benefit from this project, it could provide a sense of social integration for most of them.

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