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## **A Multi-Perspective Study of Transitions of Marginalised Youth to Employment in South African Contact Centres**

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**A Multi-Perspective Study of Transitions of Marginalised Youth to Employment in  
South African Contact Centres**

**by**

Maxine Dorkin

A thesis submitted to the Faculty of Humanities

University of the Witwatersrand, Johannesburg,

in fulfilment of the requirements for the degree of Doctor of Philosophy in Industrial  
Social Work

**March 2025**

**Declaration**

This serves to confirm that the thesis presented is my original work and has not been  
presented for a degree at any other university.

Maxine Dorkin

A handwritten signature in black ink, appearing to read 'MDorkin', located below the printed name.

## **Dedication**

I dedicate this dissertation to my dear Aunty Eva, who passed away on January 1, 2024. Aunty Eva was my cheerleader, confidante, and prayer support. She prayed for me through my undergraduate studies and was so excited when I told her about this doctoral project. I'm sad she is not with us today to see its completion. I have learnt much from her and am forever grateful for the role she played in my life. Her curiosity and interest in lifelong learning continue to inspire me. Her laughter and jokes remain a reminder to show up with a smile on every occasion. I lay this dissertation down as a garden of remembrance for my Aunty Eva and all the giants of faith who have gone before me to illuminate the path.

## **Acknowledgements**

I give the Lord Jesus all the honour and praise for this work. It's been a long, tough road, but His grace has kept, guided and sustained me. I could not have done this without the daily presence of the Lord. I am humbled and grateful for His never-ending love and covering.

My children, Chad and Kirsten, sacrificed their 'Mom' time to give me space to write. Your encouragement, meals (thank you, Kiki Belle), and love sustained me throughout this journey. To my parents and family: your unwavering support and prayers have been my foundation. I'm grateful for my friends who've become family—our conversations and gatherings have been vital respites. Though I cannot name everyone who contributed to this journey, know that I treasure your presence in my life.

My supervisors, Dr Francine Masson and Professor Tanya Graham, where do I even begin? Your wisdom, guidance, critical insights, and unwavering support throughout this research journey have been invaluable. Your thoughtful feedback and challenging questions have helped shape this project, resulting in work of which I am very proud. I'm incredibly honoured to have sat under your tutelage. Thank you is not enough.

Finally, the many young people you gave me the unique opportunity to enter your world and experience the realities of your brave journey to employment. This is dedicated to you and all the mentors who have come alongside you to support, encourage, and help you see beyond

your circumstances. There is much to overcome, but the resilience and fortitude I witnessed left me with a profound hope for the youth in Africa.

## **Abstract**

Youth unemployment is a critical challenge in South Africa (Statistics South Africa, 2023), with long-term scarring effects for marginalised youth (Egdell & Beck, 2020; Scarpetta et al., 2010). The United Nations (2015a) has called for enhanced support systems to help youth transition successfully to adulthood and employment.

The primary aim of the study was to explore the youth-organisation interface dynamics and develop a potential practice model for occupational social workers in South African workplaces. The research examined the transition experiences of marginalised youth, perspectives of HR professionals and supervisors/managers, and BPO industry leaders' views on innovative social methods contributing to youth-to-work transitions.

Grounded in systems (Bronfenbrenner, 1979) and structuration theory (Giddens, 1984), the study conceptualises the ‘youth-organisation interface’ as the dynamic interaction space where young people's agency encounters organisational structures, each shaping and being shaped by the other. The methodological approach employed an interpretive qualitative research design, integrating phenomenological techniques for youth data to prioritise lived experiences of youth and thematic analysis of organisational perspectives to identify patterns across different stakeholders. This methodological integration was explicitly chosen to honour the voices of marginalised youth while facilitating systematic comparison with organisational perspectives. The qualitative study included semi-structured interviews with 20 youth and 12 organisational professionals across five different organisations within the business process outsourcing sector.

Key findings revealed that most youth (85%) maintained positive attitudes despite challenges. Peer relationships and team leader support were crucial for workplace integration, with 90% reporting that peers facilitated employment transition. Family support was especially vital for seven single mothers in the study. Despite limited income, 60% felt obligated to support families financially. Critically, 75% could not fund their studies with their current income, perpetuating the poverty cycle. Organisational findings revealed that 75% of participants (9 of 12) believed the BPO employee value proposition for youth workers requires improvement. Four participants identified a skills shortage and inadequate development for middle management roles in the BPO industry. While 25% viewed youth as stuck in their positions, 50% believed progression opportunities exist within contact centres.

The study's significant contribution is its multi-level practice intervention model for occupational social workers. This innovative model reconceptualises occupational social work practice by shifting from individual-focused interventions to a systems-oriented approach that offers interventions to address both structural barriers and individual needs. It extends beyond existing occupational social work theories by integrating individual skill development, organisational interventions, and community engagement components within a coherent theoretical framework. The youth transition to work journey was mapped across four transition stages: recruitment and hiring, training and development, induction and onboarding, and the employment phase. Multi-level occupational social work practice interventions were mapped across these four transition stages to meet the needs of youth employees and organisations. The interventions were developed to be interrelated, each leading into and feeding off the other:

micro↔meso↔macro. The model offers strategies that contribute to both theoretical advancement in occupational social work and practical applications for addressing youth unemployment at multiple levels.

**Keywords:** Occupational Social Work, Youth unemployment, Transition to Employment, Marginalised Youth, Business Process Outsourcing, Youth-Organisation Interface



### Abbreviations

|                                                        |       |
|--------------------------------------------------------|-------|
| Organisation for Economic Co-operation and Development | OECD  |
| United Nations                                         | UN    |
| Not in employment, Education or Training               | NEET  |
| Occupational Social Work                               | OSW   |
| Business Process Outsourcing                           | BPO   |
| Global Business Services                               | GBS   |
| Employee Value Proposition                             | EVP   |
| Net Promoter Score                                     | NPS   |
| Protection of Personal Information Act                 | POPI  |
| On the Job Training                                    | OJT   |
| Human Resources                                        | HR    |
| Employment Tax Incentive                               | ETI   |
| Business Process Enabling South Africa                 | BPESA |
| School-to-work-transition                              | SWT   |
| The Department of Trade, Industry and Competition      | DTIC  |
| Active Labour Market Policies                          | ALMP  |

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## **CHAPTER ONE**

“Images of a classless society, a common way of speaking, dressing, and seeing, can also hide more profound differences; there is a surface on which everyone appears on an equal plane, but breaking the surface may require a code people lack”

(Sennett 1998: p.75).

### **1.1 Introduction**

Transitioning from school to work is challenging for young people in South Africa, especially for marginalised youth from underprivileged backgrounds. What are the felt experiences of marginalised youth? How do they negotiate the transition from school to work? What conditions make for a successful transition? What is understood about the experiences and conditions that youth experience? What supports exist at the youth-work interface? These questions are behind the impetus of this study.

Sennet’s (1998) sentiment regarding work highlights the challenges employees face when integrating into a work environment and brings attention to the profoundly different experiences that employees have. The above quote summarises the primary focus of this research project, based on understanding marginalised youth transitions and the dynamics associated with what he refers to as "breaking the surface" and "finding the code" in the workplace.

The United Nations (2015a) issued a call to action for all nations, with a particular focus on countries experiencing a surge in their youth populations, to step up their efforts to assist the

younger generation with access to essential services, the acquirement of necessary skills, and the establishment of connections that will facilitate a smooth transition to adulthood and the world of work. According to the Organisation for Economic Co-Operation and Development (OECD) report (2022), education quality and length, labour market conditions, economic environment, and cultural context affect the transition from education to work. The complexity of the work environment requires a set of skills and knowledge that young people from diverse backgrounds may lack (Altbeker, 2015; De Lannoy et al., 2018; Haider, 2016). Marginalised youth are at a higher risk of experiencing disparities regarding access to services and resources and, therefore, require particular attention and support to ensure their well-being and success (OECD, 2010).

In South Africa, R135.9 billion is spent on post-secondary school training and job creation initiatives (National Treasury Republic of South Africa [NTRSA], 2019). Traditional solutions to youth unemployment have had a minimal impact, with the number of unemployed young people increasing yearly (Statistics South Africa, 2020, 2023). The exploration of alternate solutions to addressing youth unemployment requires further research. This study focused on youth employment and unemployment. It developed an occupational social work practice model to address challenges that youth face transitioning from school to work.

According to Pierson (2002), social workers should see their role in organisations as catalysts and change agents. Occupational social workers have a multi-layered skill set largely under-recognised and not fully utilised in occupational settings. According to Mor Barak (1999), social workers in occupational settings work with well-coordinated client systems, with the goal of helping employees have both gainful and meaningful employment experiences. Understanding

the lived employment experiences of youth will better position occupational social workers to meet the needs of the work community they serve. According to the OECD (2022), Brazil, Greece, Italy, and South Africa have the highest share of young people suffering long-term unemployment: around 5% or more of 18-24-year-olds in these countries were not in education and had been unemployed for at least 12 months in the first quarter of 2021. According to the report, this puts these youth at risk of long-term detachment from the labour market. In the South African context, specifically, approximately 8.5 million individuals below the age of 35 in South Africa are not in education, employment, or training (NEET) (Khuluvhe & Negogogo, 2021). Given these labour demographics, South African employers must work to create work environments catering specifically for the emerging workforce.

## **1.2 Background**

Globally, there is evidence of an unprecedented rate of population demographic change. A 2019 United Nations (UN) study reported that the global population could grow to approximately 8.5 billion in 2030, 9.7 billion in 2050, and 10.9 billion by 2100. Populations in countries in sub-Saharan Africa are expected to continue growing through 2100 and to contribute more than half of the global population increase anticipated in 2050 (UN, 2022). Agbor et al. (2012) point out that without the capacity to absorb and gainfully employ a growing youth cohort, countries face a far more insidious consequence of the youth bulge. With an increasing pool of idle and dissatisfied youths, the risk of both economic and political instability increases. Ashford (2007) cautions that while population change is not the only force shaping Africa's development, failure to take advantage of the potential demographic dividend could dampen development prospects. Andrevski et al. (2014) are optimistic that the growing youth population

provides an opportunity to leverage a diverse youth workforce, which could give organisations a competitive advantage.

South African society has been described as fragmented, troubled, and rife with contradictions (Howell, 2019). It is against this fragmented socio-economic backdrop that youth transition from a marginalised unemployed disposition to employment. The July 2021 riots in Kwa-Zulu Natal are evidence of the volatile situation. The violent protests and socio-political unrest that erupted included widespread looting of shops and businesses, as well as the burning and destruction of public facilities and private properties (Vhumbunu, 2021). The protests highlight the deep-seated results of ongoing exclusion, inequality and the effects of unemployment (Makgetla, 2020; Mongale, 2022).

Dealing with unemployment is challenging and a severe life-disrupting event that can adversely affect how youth then successfully transition to employment (Breen, 2005; Brandt & Hank, 2014). Young people who are NEET experience significant negative effects on their physical, emotional, and psycho-social well-being (Dickens & Marx, 2020; OECD, 2022). The extant literature argues that unemployment has long-term scarring effects (Egdell & Beck, 2020; Scarpetta et al., 2010). Given these impacts, more must be done to address the growing crisis, and occupational social workers must be strategically equipped to facilitate this change.

### **1.2.1 Business Process Outsourcing (BPO) and Youth Employment**

Despite its diverse and challenging history, South Africa has been at the forefront of cutting-edge youth policy formulation efforts and labour market practices (Leibbrandt et al.,



2010). The South African government has identified the business process outsourcing (BPO) sector as a critical driver for economic growth and employment, with a number of employment initiatives being driven by the government (Anwar & Graham, 2019). According to Kahrović and Krstić (2015), business process outsourcing (BPO) is the transfer of business processes from within an organisation to external service providers. Anwar and Graham differentiate between the terms call centre and contact centre. According to the authors, a call centre is the term used by companies to administer support services and information enquiries for their customers, primarily through voice calls, in contrast the term ‘contact centre’ includes non-voice interactions, such as emails, text messages, and web chats. The terms ‘contact centre’ and ‘BPO centre’ will be used interchangeably in this research study.

A recent McKinsey report valued the total South African BPO market in 2020 at \$461 million and expected it to grow at around 3% per annum (Rajagopaul et al., 2020). Government support coupled with enabling legislation, the growing technological infrastructure, and the large youth population are contributing factors to the growth of the South African BPO sector (Altman, 2013; Willcocks et al., 2015).

The outcome of a 2021 survey by Ryan Strategic Advisory positioned South Africa as the most favoured offshore global location for business process services, ranking South Africa number one out of 53 countries in the survey (Ryan Strategic Advisory, 2021; Williams & Pritchard, 2022). The position as the top global hub for business process services has significant potential to alter the youth employment landscape. Given this, it is imperative for employers and professionals to prepare themselves for the impending changes. Early work experience in the BPO sector could be vital in shaping future labour market experiences (Baum & Ruhm, 2016;

Mortimer & Staff, 2004; Simpson et al., 2018). Occupational social workers can help create a more inclusive workplace environment that benefits all stakeholders by working with BPO employers to adapt and develop an organisational approach that matches marginalised youth needs.

### **1.2.2 Occupational Social Work and Youth Transition to Employment**

According to South African government regulation, “occupational social work is a specialised field of social work practice which addresses the human and social needs of the work community within a developmental approach, through a variety of interventions which aim to foster optimal adaptation between individuals and their environment” (Department of Social Development, 2020, p.69). Current South African occupational social work practice, however, does not reflect the youth labour force's social and economic realities or needs. Occupational social practice requires a sharper developmental focus on youth policies and employers' services.

Akabas (1995) in Van Breda (2009, p.285) asserts that occupational social work is “policies and services, delivered through the auspices of employers and trade unions, to workers and those that seek entry in the workplace”. This definition refers to both policies and services. The examination of the impact of workplace and youth labour-related policies and services has not received much focus from the occupational social work academic fraternity. Akabas’s (1995) definition includes clients outside the organisation seeking entry into the workplace; this has traditionally not been a focus in occupational social work practice. The primary focus of social work in the workplace has been on employees who are already part of the organisation. In light of the unemployment crisis and the increasing number of NEET individuals (UN, 2019), it is imperative for occupational social workers to carefully consider their approach towards work

populations seeking entry into the workplace. To stay relevant to the requirements of the South African youth labour force, occupational social work must focus on extending its services to client populations beyond organisations.

According to the Code of Ethics of the South African Council of Social Service Professionals (SACSSP n.d.,1), “social workers promote social justice and social change with, and on behalf of, their client systems.” Occupational social workers have the potential to contribute to the field, furthering the profession's social justice aims. In addition to this, the definition also highlights a potential role for occupational social workers in youth policy advocacy. The core aim of this study is to better understand individuals at the youth-organisation interface with a particular focus on the BPO sector. Whitehead et al. (2023) posits that more information is needed to understand young people's challenges in accessing and progressing in the BPO sector. This study meets the BPO sectoral need for a better understanding of the youth population. Mor Barak (1999) points out that developing the fit between the various client systems in the workplace and striving toward gainful employment for all employees is a basic precept for all occupational social work practices. Placing youth at the centre of this study aids in achieving the broader precept of fit echoed by Mor Barak (1999). The following section delves deeper into the study's rationale with a particular focus on how occupational social workers can play a role in the youth-to-employment transition.

### **1.3 Rationale for the Study**

Guba (1978), cited in Younas et al. (2023), noted that research problems do not just simply exist in the human world, waiting to be picked up by researchers. Instead, research

problems are identified, created, and refined through researchers' extensive work after considering their personal interests, local and global significance, and gaps in practice and theory (Jacobs, 2013; Newman & Covrig, 2013). A fourfold rationale formed the basis for this research and is expanded on in the next section.

### **1.3.1            Rationale One: Explore the Role of Occupational Social Work in Addressing Youth-Work Transition**

The role of occupational social work in addressing youth-work transition has not been extensively researched. A deeper understanding of young people's experience could assist social workers in closing the youth-work knowledge gap. Due to my experience working with youth in transition, I was interested in exploring the research and practice gap in terms of the potential value occupational social work can add to the youth-work interface.

Occupational social work is uniquely positioned at the interface of business, government, civil society, and employee challenges. Van Breda (2009, p.284) emphasises that "notions of the work community, of interface and goodness of fit, of multiple client systems and a person-in-environment are central to the conceptualisation of occupational social work." As Inui (2005) points out, the transiting process is becoming more precarious for young people, but cautions that the more significant challenge is the lack of societal understanding of the risks and problems that young work seekers face. The complex societal dynamics in South Africa make the youth transition process unique and challenging. Research and literature that explores the unique South African youth-work interface and the impact that this has on marginalised youths' transition experiences, is needed. This research can contribute valuable insights that will help shape occupational social work intervention.

### **1.3.2            Rationale Two: Understand the Experiences and Views of Key Role Players in Youth Employing Organisations, i.e. employers and employees**

Occupational social workers are primarily concerned with organisational ‘interface’ issues (Van Breda, 2009) exploring interface issues requires an in-depth understanding of youth experiences and employers' views. The youth workforce holds enormous potential and can positively impact the work environments they find themselves in (Lerner, 2009). Employers should recognise the value of youth in the workplace. Young workers bring a fresh perspective, innovative ideas, and a willingness to learn and adapt quickly. Inui (2005) emphasised the importance of communicating and understanding youth's value in the workplace.

The perspectives of human resource (HR) managers and supervisors working with youth could help close potential transition gaps. De Lannoy et al. (2018) point out that few interventions focus on the demand or employer sides of the youth labour market; therefore, a study incorporating the perspectives of both the employees and employers is needed.

### **1.3.3            Rationale Three: Explore the Potential for Innovation and the Deficits in Assisting Young People in Transitioning to the Workplace (Mulgan, 2006)**

According to Mulgan (2006), there is a discrepancy in innovation when supporting young adults during difficult life transitions. Mulgan (2006) argues that it is imperative to provide effective assistance to help youth attain stability in their careers, relationships, and overall

lifestyles. Examining how youth and organisations can work together to find mutually beneficial opportunities and to bridge the youth-work transition gap is essential.

According to Zahra et al. (2009), social innovation is about enhancing social wealth through activities and processes that take advantage of opportunities - by creating new ventures or innovatively managing existing organisations. Moulaert et al. (2013) see social innovation as innovation in social relations, both in the micro and macro spheres; the authors link social innovation with empowerment processes. This view links well with social innovation processes that could be utilised in youth transition to work.

As put forward by Mulgan (2006), social innovation is innovative activities and services that meet social needs. Exploring innovative activities that can meet social needs is aligned with the goals of occupational social work (Department of Social Development, 2020). Becoming experts in social innovation could help occupational social workers become more relevant to both employees' and employers' needs.

Social innovation is a relatively new and unexplored field of study; the concept has only appeared in social science discourses during the last decade and is scattered throughout various disciplines (Cajaiba-Santana, 2014). Although calls for incorporating social innovation into social work education have been made (Berzin & Pitt-Catsoupes, 2014; Germak & Singh, 2009), there are few examples of such integration in practice (Berzin & Pitt-Catsoupes, 2013, 2014). Today, a few schools of social work now offer courses in social innovation and entrepreneurship. These include George Warren Brown, the University of Central Florida,

Boston College Graduate School of Social Work, and the University of Illinois (Nandan et al., 2015). The above examples of social innovation in educational programmes for social work are primarily based in schools in the United States of America (USA).

The social conditions in South Africa require a radically different problem-solving lens, and innovative activity driven by occupational social workers that meet social needs (Mulgan, 2006) could play a significant contributory role. Complementing this view, Phills et al. (2008) emphasise the need for a social innovation framework that can direct students towards creating solutions that outperform current offerings. A key objective of this research is to enrich the academic discourse and contribute to creating an occupational social work model of practice that adds socially innovative practice interventions to the field.

#### **1.3.4 Rationale Four: The Researcher's Personal Transition Journey and Employment Experience in the BPO and Youth Sectors**

An important motivation and inspiration for the study was my personal interest and years of professional work experience in the youth employment sector. Personal experience, according to Jacobs (2013), represents the insights that one gains when engaged in professional practice. I want to add that my personal experience includes my position as a mother with two young adult children currently facing the challenges of unemployment and transitioning to decent work. In the next section I will delve into how my experiences growing up in apartheid South Africa has shaped my interest in transition studies and youth employment.

The first experience was when I navigated my transition from school to university and university to employment. During the school-to-university transition, I received university support through a 'transition programme for previously disadvantaged youth' by the University of Kwa-Zulu Natal. This programme profoundly affected my confidence and assisted me in succeeding academically and in employment. My university-to-employment transition involved receiving support and mentoring from more experienced colleagues. These positive early work experiences contributed to my career success.

The second experience that shaped my perspective on transition was employment in the youth sector. This professional experience was crucial for developing my research curiosity around challenges in the youth employment sector. On the youth or supply side, I worked in a 'Youth Employment Accelerator'. I was responsible for overseeing work readiness initiatives, supporting youth transition to employment, and engaging with youth employers. This supply-side experience helped me see first-hand the transition challenges and successes that youth and employers experienced and assisted in formulating the research questions in this study. The Youth Employment Accelerator experience allowed me to be involved in programme delivery over seven years, reaching approximately 5000 youth transitioning to employment.

From an employer or demand-side perspective, i.e. the employer side, I worked as a Human Resource Specialist in the BPO Technology sector. This role entailed understanding employers' needs and implementing innovative practices that meet employees' and employers' needs. This role gave me exposure to the challenges employers face when hiring youth. It was from these practical experiences that I began to see the challenges that youth and employers face



and where the beginnings of the research problem were formulated. Drawing on the identified needs as well as my personal and field experience, the next section introduces the problem statement that formed the basis for this research study.

## **1.4 Problem Statement**

The growing NEET population in South Africa and the rapid growth of the South African BPO sector present both a challenge and an opportunity for unemployed youth to be gainfully employed in the BPO sector. As NEET individuals enter the workforce, they often carry the burden of prolonged unemployment (Brandt & Hank, 2014; Scarpetta et al., 2010) and face numerous socio-economic obstacles (Baldry et al., 2019; Graham et al., 2019a). While the BPO sector may offer employment opportunities, perspectives on integrating marginalised youth and promoting their success are lacking across various stakeholders. Understanding the experiences of youth and the viewpoints of key stakeholders in the BPO sector, including supervisors and human resources specialists, around the issues of youth-to-work interface, can inform social innovations and tailor practice interventions to improve transitions, experiences, and outcomes.

In response to these challenges, the research aim, objectives and core research questions are outlined below.

## **1.5 Research Aim and Objectives**

### **1.5.1 Primary Aim**

To explore the dynamics that exist at the youth-organisation interface and develop a potential model of practice for occupational social workers in South African workplaces.

### **1.5.2 Secondary Objectives**

1. To explore the experiences and conditions that contribute to the successful transition to work for marginalised youth.
- 2a. To understand the views that Human Resource personnel and Supervisors/Managers hold about their work with marginalised youth.
- 2b. To understand the views of BPO industry leaders in addressing youth transition to employment and the potential for social innovation in the youth employment sector.
3. To develop a potential model of practice for occupational social workers that addresses issues related to youth employment at the youth-organisation interface.

### **1.5.3 Research Questions**

1. What are the transition experiences of marginalised youth in the organisations they are employed in?
2. What are the views of human resource professionals and supervisors/managers who work with marginalised youth transitioning to work?
3. What are the views of BPO industry leaders around the dynamics that exist at the youth organisation interface, and what social innovative methods do they see as contributing to the youth-to-work transition?
4. What factors need to be considered in a model of practice for occupational social workers in addressing youth unemployment at the youth-organisation interface?

### **1.6 Value of the Study**

The following segment outlines the study's value, focusing on its multidisciplinary, occupational social work aspect and its potential for future research. According to Freire (2000),

what distinguishes professional skills from others is the capacity for reflection in the midst of action.

### **1.6.1 Multi-disciplinary Value**

Wellington (2012) suggests that frontiers of knowledge may possess disciplinary, multi-disciplinary, inter-disciplinary or trans-disciplinary characteristics and features. This study spans disciplinary boundaries between occupational social work practice, youth development, business management, human resource management, and organisational leadership. The study focuses on the transitional experiences of youth and the implications for various industries. It aims to provide specialised knowledge across disciplines and potentially impact practice. The findings significantly affect policy, practice, and the academic community.

### **1.6.2 Occupational Social Work Value**

This study contributes to the field of occupational social work, particularly in macro-practice intervention. According to Netting et al. (2008, p.5), “macro-practice is a professionally-guided intervention that aims to bring about positive change in organisational, community, and policy development”. This research adds insight into applied macro-practice issues by examining the issues surrounding the interface between youth and work.

The practice of macro-work within social work has received little attention. Hill et al. (2010) cite three reasons for the invisibility of macro-practitioners, including 1) macro-practitioners' failure to claim a social work identity in their positions, 2) the traditional micro-macro-practice divide, and 3) social worker's belief that their education does not adequately prepare them for macro-practice (Gibelman, 1999; McLaughlin, 2009; Netting, 2005).

The value of these findings is that they can contribute towards strengthening the macro-social work identity by demonstrating the important role occupational social workers play in practising macro-work. In addition, the study findings bridge the divide between micro-meso-macro social work by demonstrating occupational social workers' roles in supporting youth's transition with micro-, meso- and macro-practice level interventions. Furthermore, the findings highlight the relevance of integrated multi-level practice in South African universities and contribute to the South African macro-practice curriculum. Extending the opportunities that exist for occupational social workers, Netting et al. (2008) point out that a future opportunity for macro-practitioners lies in technology and innovation. Integrating socially innovative activities could provide smoother work transitions for youth and improved work conditions for marginalised youth.

Occupational social work practice is complex, more so with marginalised youth. To leverage potential technologies and innovative methods, a youth transition practice model for occupational social work is needed. According to Netting (2008, p.9), "Social work models of practice are considered prescriptions based on theories that provide guidance and direction for the practitioner." Based on an application of Bronfenbrenner's (1979) ecological model of human development, a model of practice is presented to guide occupational social work interventions and provide direction for youth-to-work intervention in South African workplaces.

The research gives voice to marginalised youth experiences by utilising an interpretivist phenomenological research design in the youth component of the study. An interpretive

phenomenological research approach allowed the researcher to understand the lived experiences of youth entering employment (Kivunja & Kuyini, 2017; Neubauer et al., 2019).

### **1.6.3 Value to Future Policy and Research**

There is anticipated value in contributing to future academic research efforts in the BPO sector in youth transition to employment. The research expects to add value to applied macro-social work research and intervention. The findings can potentially strengthen the field of occupational social work by adding insights and practical implications for youth intervention efforts.

#### **1.6.3.1 Contribution to Youth Employment Policy Initiatives**

Alam and de Diego (2019) note that school-to-work transition policies, programmes and activities can be divided into two categories: firstly, human capital programmes aimed at facilitating access to post-secondary education or training and, secondly, active labour market policies (ALMP) and interventions ALMP/I's which are aimed at creating employment opportunities for young people. It is anticipated that the research could contribute towards human capital programmes and government and workplace policies aimed at helping young people overcome barriers to work entry. An understanding of the economic and emotional 'cost' of transitioning to work could assist in tailored policy interventions that cater to the needs of youth.

Occupational social workers practising macro-work have an important social justice and advocacy role to play. Advocating for social justice and promoting social change on behalf of clients is emphasised in the South African Council of Social Service Professionals (SACSSP)

code of ethics (SACSSP n.d.,1). This research has value in adding to the youth voice, thereby contributing to the efforts in the profession to promote social justice and youth advocacy.

#### **1.6.4 Value to the BPO Sector**

The study could inform future youth hiring and employment support practices and contribute to developing youth-friendly organisational practices. The employee-supervisor relationship is important in the youth-to-work transition. There is value in contributing to initiatives aimed at enhancing the employee-supervisor relationship. The study provides supervisors with insight into the unique factors associated with a marginalised youth workforce. Consequently, a supervisor training programme for supervisors could result from these insights.

To better understand how the key research questions will be addressed, a table of key terms utilised in the study is presented below.

**Table 1***Key Terms*

| <b>Terms</b>             | <b>Description</b>                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                            |
|--------------------------|-----------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------|
| Occupational Social Work | “Occupational social work is a specialised field of social work practice which address the human and social needs of the work community within a developmental approach, through a variety of interventions which aim to foster optimal adaptation between individuals and their environment” (Department of Social Development, 2020, p.69). |
| Youth Unemployment       | Young people aged 15-34 years who are not in employment, education, or training (Statistics South Africa, 2020).                                                                                                                                                                                                                              |
| Marginalised             | “To be marginalised is to have a sense that one does not belong and, in so doing, to feel that one is neither a valued member of a community and able to make a valuable contribution within that community, nor able to access the range of services or opportunities open to others” (Mowat, 2015, p.457).                                  |
| Employee                 | Refers to "a person whose employment is governed by a contract of service or other relevant employment laws" (Standards Committee of EAPA-SA, 2015:2).                                                                                                                                                                                        |
| Social Innovation        | Social innovation includes any new processes, products and services that address social issues and improve the quality of human life at micro and/or macro-levels (Pol & Ville, 2009).                                                                                                                                                        |
| Transition to Employment | The process where young people move from full-time schooling activities to post-school activities, including post-secondary education, vocational training, and potential employment – this might take the form of                                                                                                                            |

|                                    |                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                      |
|------------------------------------|--------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------|
|                                    | casual work, fixed-term employment, labour market programmes, and community participation (du Toit, 2005).                                                                                                                                                                                                                           |
| Business Process Outsourcing (BPO) | Business process outsourcing (BPO) is the movement of a business process from inside the organisation to external service providers. BPO is the delegation of (usually non-core) business processes to an external service provider who owns, administers and manages it (Kahrović & Krstić, 2015).                                  |
| Training                           | Planned intervention designed to enhance the determinants of individual job performance (Chiaburu, D. & Tekleab, A., 2005).                                                                                                                                                                                                          |
| Call Centre and Contact Centre     | Call centre is the term used by companies administering support services and information enquiries for its customers, primarily through voice calls. We prefer the term ‘contact centre’ since non-voice interactions (emails, text messages, web chats) are becoming the norm in the outsourcing industry (Anwar and Graham, 2019). |

## 1.7 Overview of the Study

The primary aim of the study is to explore the dynamics that exist at the youth-organisation interface and develop a potential model of practice for occupational social workers in South African workplaces. The study aims addresses gaps in the understanding of youth transition to employment. While the BPO sector may offer employment opportunities, perspectives on integrating marginalised youth and promoting their success are lacking across various stakeholders. Understanding the experiences of youth and the viewpoints of key stakeholders in the BPO sector, including supervisors and human resources specialists, around the issues of youth-to-work interface, can inform social innovations and tailor practice interventions to improve transitions, experiences and outcomes.



The main questions that guided the study included the transition experiences of marginalised youth in the organisations in which they were employed. In addition, the views of human resource professionals' supervisors/managers and BPO industry leaders were obtained. An important over-arching question is: what factors need to be considered in a model of practice for occupational social workers in addressing youth unemployment at the youth-organisation interface?

The significance of this research lies in its cross-disciplinary scope, which spans boundaries between occupational social work practice, youth development, business management, human resource management, and organisational leadership. It has value in informing hiring and people practices in the BPO sector and shaping future youth policy and research. The study was divided into two main parts. Part one dealt with the youth/employee population and utilised a phenomenological approach, which was suited to better understanding the felt experiences of youth as they transitioned to employment. Part two focused on the organisation/employer perspectives in working with youth. The theoretical framework was grounded in Bronfenbrenner's Ecological Systems Theory, which provided a comprehensive lens through which to examine the multifaceted influences on youth development and education. From a methodological point of view, a multi-perspective research design was followed. The study utilised an interpretivist approach, with phenomenological analysis for the youth data and thematic analysis applied to employer data.

The dissertation is structured as follows: Chapter two will provide insights into the utilised theoretical framework with attention given to the phenomenological, systems and structuration theoretical approaches. Chapters three and four are literature review chapters. Chapter three examines the youth literature, focusing on understanding the complex dynamics of marginalised youth as they transition to work. Chapter five will detail the research design and methodology employed in this study. Chapters six and seven will present and discuss the findings, respectively, culminating in chapter eight, which presents the occupational social work model developed from the study and chapter nine, which will offer conclusions and recommendations based on the research outcomes.

## **1.8 Conclusion**

Chapter one introduced the research topic, which explores the dynamics at the youth-organisation interface and a potential practice model for occupational social workers in South African workplaces. The chapter outlined the study's background and context and discussed the four-prong rationale. This was followed by the study's aims, including the theoretical and empirical objectives. The study's contribution to youth employment in the BPO sector, specifically to human resource practitioners and supervisors/managers, was presented.

## **CHAPTER TWO**

### **Exploring the Dynamics of Marginalised Youth Experiences at the Youth-Work Interface:**

#### **A Theoretical Framework**

##### **2.1 Introduction**

The study explored the dynamics at the youth-work interface and developed a potential practice model for occupational social workers in South African workplaces. As Reeves et al. (2008) argue, theoretical frameworks provide researchers with varied perspectives to explore complex social problems. The theoretical framework underpins the research and is given special attention in this chapter by focusing on why a phenomenological approach was adopted and its relevance to youth transitioning to work. Furthermore, Bronfenbrenner's (1979) systems approach is expounded on. Lastly, attention is given to structuration theory and the role this plays in better understanding the role of work in developing youth identity.

##### **2.2 Theoretical Framework Guiding the Study**

This section provides the essential theoretical underpinnings for the youth component of the study. It explores the importance of the phenomenological approach that was utilised, including how youth transition to work and Heidegger's concept of Dasein relate. Following this, the theoretical linkages of systems and structuration theory will be focused on. The discussion then expands on how systems and structuration effectively capture the dynamic relationships within the workplace, including supervisor-employee relationships, peer relationships, and relationships within family and community systems.

### **2.2.1 Phenomenological Approach**

Using a phenomenological approach to conceptualise the study and understand the research findings was appropriate as it emphasises the significance of how individual subjectivities shape the perception of reality and affect the way the world is experienced and interpreted (Moran, 2000). Van Manen (2017) argues that phenomenology is attentive to the practice of thoughtfulness and searching for what it means to become more fully human.

Heideggerian phenomenology provides essential concepts for understanding the lived experiences of youth during their transition to employment. Horrigan-Kelly et al. (2016, p.5) see the use of Heideggerian concepts as an opportunity to theoretically frame interpretive phenomenological research. Concepts such as “lived experience, everyday ordinariness, Dasein, ‘being in the world’, being with, encounters with entities, temporality, and the care structure” effectively create a framework for subject-related interpretive phenomenology to take place (Horrigan-Kelly et al., 2016, p.5).

The tenets raised by Horrigan-Kelly et al. (2016) provide a valuable analytical tool for researching youth-to-work transition. Heideggerian concepts like ‘being in the world’ can help understand how the external environment shapes youth subjectivity internally, while temporality assists in analysing how past experiences shape present reality. A full explication of all the Heideggerian philosophical tenets is beyond the scope of this report. For the lived experience of youth to be understood, ‘being in the world’ or Dasein, provides a valuable lens which is discussed in the next section (Inwood, 2019). These powerful phenomenological concepts are expanded in chapter six, which contains the interpretation of the youth findings.

### **2.2.1.1 The Youth-Work Interface: ‘Being in the World’**

Inwood (2019) describes Dasein as a term coined by Heidegger that refers to both the human being and the being humans possess, enabling them to respond to circumstances and choose their being. Based on the concept of Dasein, marginalised youth in the workplace respond to and are shaped by socio-economic and cultural realities and their own subjective experiences. Youth are transitioning to work while ‘being in the world’, and their experience of the world is shaping their identity or ‘being with’. While Heidegger’s concepts are complex, there is great value in how they assist in understanding how the external environment shapes youth internally (identity). Adams and Marshall (1996) concur that the identity development process is both an individual and a social phenomenon. As shown in this report, the transition to work and the development of identity happens in and through relationships with peers, mentors, supervisors and managers.

In addition to ‘being in the world’ and ‘being with’, Heidegger’s concept of temporality and how time is viewed from a phenomenological perspective is valuable for discussing transition or movement from one position to another over time. Blattner (2005) suggests that to discuss the concept of being, it is essential to recognise the importance of time. He argues that time serves as the framework within which we understand being, meaning that our perception of existence is intrinsically linked to our experience of time. Alawa (2017) posits that temporality refers to an interconnected past, present and future. Temporality and time are essential concepts in a study of transition, as they give space for an analysis of marginalised youth’s present reality, but also examines how past experiences shape the present. The phenomenological concept of temporality is linked to Giddens’s (1984) interest in structuration, which explores social practices

across time and space. Structuration theory forms a core part of the research study's positioning on youth transition and is expanded on later in this chapter.

Building on the concept of becoming, Worth (2009) views 'becoming' as an important new direction for youth transition research. te Riele (2004) concurs that while the past and present experiences impact youth transition, the focus on the future has not been given much research attention. This thesis advocates that transition theory must focus on the future rather than the past.

Worth (2009) expands on the concept of becoming by explaining that 'becoming' means that young people, along with their parents and policymakers, recognise that they are going through a transition. This involves making important life choices as they prepare for adulthood and think about the future. The construct 'becoming' over time adds a future focus to youth development. The significance of this construct for the present study is that while exploring present conditions that shape experiences is essential, attention also needs to be given to the future state that youth are moving into or 'becoming' and the possibilities for their transition over time.

In addition, the concept of 'becoming' complements the tenets of positive youth development espoused by Lerner (2021), who argues that young people placed into positive development-promoting circumstances can be positively changed. Similarly, both 'becoming' and positive youth development align with structuration theory (Giddens, 1984), which

highlights the duality of structure and action. In Giddens's (1984) view, individuals produce and reproduce social structures through their daily actions.

Applying structuration theoretical frameworks to the study strengthens the use of a phenomenological approach to address meaning, experience, and interface issues in the broader organisational context. The following section examines why systems theory was chosen as one of the core theories for the research study and the value that this theory plays in understanding the holistic nature of youth experiences.

### **2.3 Systems Theory**

Urie Bronfenbrenner's (1979) classic theoretical ecological systems theory provided an appropriate foundation for understanding the complex dynamics at the youth-organisation interface. Ecological systems theory introduces an essential multi-layer perspective to understanding development and offers a valuable lens for exploring youth-to-work transition. In addition, the theoretical framework of ecological systems is well-positioned to explore the interplay of multiple micro-; macro-systems in the workplace. Systems theory explores the relationships between people and further encapsulates the larger systems that shape youth development and readiness for work. In the context of this study, the larger systems that affect youth transition to work include the political, socio-structural, educational, economic, cultural, and religious/spiritual forces. Bronfenbrenner's (1979) theory allows inductive constructed meanings to emerge from the data, analytically. The transition of marginalised youth to work in South Africa is complex, with many dynamic and interconnected systemic influences. Bronfenbrenner's (1979) theory is appropriate, as it can fully explore the intertwined systems and factors in organisations. Bronfenbrenner (1998) sought to develop a theory of human

development that considers the influences of all the systems that impact individual lived experiences.

Lőrinc et al. (2020) propose that Bronfenbrenner's ecological systems theory facilitates a deeper understanding of the dynamic interactions among the micro-, meso-, exo-, and macro-levels of young people's lives, helping to provide a more comprehensive understanding of the processes and mechanisms that lead to youth becoming NEET. Structuration theory complements systems theory as it recognises the reciprocal role of individuals in the broader ecosystem.

Fourie and Leibbrandt (2012) point out that the prevailing approach to researching unemployment is predominantly quantitative. Johansson (2017) asserts that youth studies need new theories to better examine how class, gender, and ethnicity interact with each other in social and cultural contexts. Focusing on youth transition to employment from a systems perspective addressed the need for a more holistic approach to youth studies, which incorporates multiple systems and puts youth voices at the forefront of the research. I incorporated structuration theory as a complementary theoretical framework to better understand the individual and interrelationships between systems. With structuration and systems theoretical frameworks as the foundation, the study conceptualises the 'youth-organisation interface' as the dynamic interaction space where young people's agency encounters organisational structures, each shaping and being shaped by the other. The following section builds on the understanding of systems theory and how this links to how youth identity is shaped as young people's agency encounters organisational structures.



### **2.3.1 Bronfenbrenner on Youth Identity**

Bronfenbrenner (1979) referred to the relationships between people and systems as an antecedent to structuration theory, which is in keeping with how Erikson (1980) conceptualised development. Bronfenbrenner's revised bio-ecological theory in its current form specifies that researchers should study the settings in which a developing individual spends time, as well as the relations with others in the same settings i.e., the personal characteristics of the individual and those with whom they typically interact (Rosa & Tudge, 2013). Oppong (2014) agrees that we cannot successfully account for human actions or develop interventions without appreciating the duality of structure and agency. These views are consistent with structuration and systems theory, which provide a guiding framework for this study.

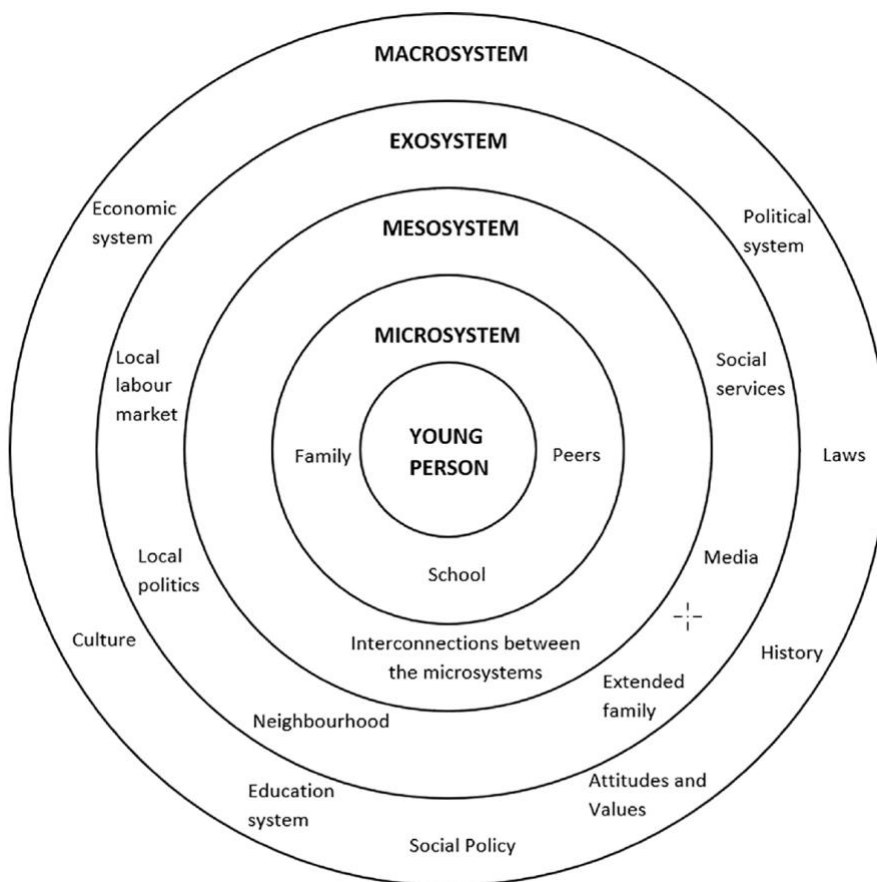
Bronfenbrenner's ecological theory can help understand the complex relationships experienced and developed as young people develop their identities and negotiate the transitions to work. Bronfenbrenner (1979) proposed that successive systems influence the individual, from the micro-system to the meso-, exo-, and macro-systems. Lőrinc et al. (2020) describe complex systems as patterns of activities, roles, and relationships surrounding the developing person, extending outward to the meso-system, exo-system, and macro-system in a concentric arrangement. Figure 1 from Eisenmann et al. (2020) demonstrates the concentric bio-ecological model.

The empirical study by Lőrinc et al. (2020) of 53 young NEET's accounts of their school and transition experiences drew upon Bronfenbrenner's ecological systems theory. The research focuses specifically on school experiences, but can likewise be adapted to understand NEET's

work experiences better. The authors reject the individualisation of the ‘NEET problem’ and argue that negative school experiences must be understood in the context of structural conditions, including funding cuts in education and support services, transformations in the labour market and socio-economic deprivation. The rich qualitative data from this study and the application of Bronfenbrenner’s (1979) systems model lays a solid foundation for building a South African NEET Work Transition Model.

**Figure 1**

*Model of Bronfenbrenner’s Ecological Systems Theory*



*Note.* This model illustrates the multiple layers of environmental influence, from the individual to broader societal structures. From "SWITCH: Rationale, design, and implementation of a community, school, and family-based intervention to modify behaviours related to childhood obesity," by J. C. Eisenmann, D. A. Gentile, G. J. Welk, R. R. Rosenkranz, A. L. Standen, C. A. Hastmann, & S. B. Foster, 2008, BMC Public Health, 8(1), Article 223 (<https://doi.org/10.1186/1471-2458-8-223>). CC BY 4.0.

Bronfenbrenner and Morris (1998, 2006) reformulated person characteristics into three categories: force, resource, and demand to enhance the original model. Force characteristics can be summarised as “active behavioural dispositions” (Bronfenbrenner & Morris, 2006, p.810) that can be broken down further into developmentally generative (e.g., curiosity, agency, ability to delay gratification) and developmentally disruptive (e.g., impulsiveness, distractibility, inability to delay gratification) characteristics. Exploring the characteristics of marginalised youth display as they transition to work, provides a useful conceptual tool for employers to better understand youth (Bronfenbrenner & Morris, 2006).

An interesting delineation of Bronfenbrenner’s (1979) theory is proposed by Navarro and Tudge (2022), who argue that youth development lacks an overarching theory to address the intersection of development and technology. A neo-ecological theory is proposed, which includes the tenets of the bio-ecological theory, but suggests key modifications to reflect the technological world. The neo-technological theory is an important addition to not only youth identity but also school-to-work transition, as it takes into account the role that the virtual/technological space has on youth interaction with the environment. Following this, it can be argued that youth identity is interlinked to the environment and place physically and virtually;

thus, including a person in the environment (virtual and physical) provides a good launchpad for understanding youth in context. A holistic approach, that examines the individual experiences and environmental conditions that shape youth experiences, is in keeping with the phenomenological philosophical framework that guides this study and is also in line with its aims to explore the experiences and conditions of recently employed youth.

Phinney (2000) notes that marginalised youth must confront and integrate more aspects of themselves to attain a positive social identity. Betcherman et al. (2007) argue that the complex set of hurdles that youth with poor education, youth with disabilities, those affected by HIV and AIDS, ethnic minorities and migrants need to negotiate to succeed in the world of work, put them at a further disadvantage. Bronfenbrenner's theory is an essential lens for understanding the person-in-multiple environments (Kondrat, 2013; Mattaini et al., 2002) and the impact of this on youth identity formation. According to McAdams et al. (2006), youth face the twin identity questions, which are "Who am I?" and "What is my place in this world?"

The place where youth either fit or experience misfit is inextricably linked to their sense of community, belonging, esteem, and ability to successfully transition to the next development phase. Youth identity development occurs in the liminal space between the personal/micro- and the environmental/macro-divide. The workplace and relationships in the workplace are, therefore, critical to youth identity development. Given the interplay between individuals, the next section expands on structuration theory and its link to youth-to-work experience.

## **2.4 Structuration Theory**

Sociologist Anthony Giddens developed structuration theory in 1984. This theory combines two opposing strands of social thought: structuralism and functionalism. De Almeida (2015) argues that structuralism is a mode of knowledge of nature and human life that is interested in relationships rather than individual objects. Structuralism, as far as it acknowledges relationships, is useful when examining the complex relationships at the youth-work interface. While structuralism focuses on relationships functionalism provides a complementary view by directing attention to the functions performed.

Gómez-Diago (2019) asserts that functionalism is primarily a theoretical perspective that has a specialised focus on the functions performed by social structures such as institutions, hierarchies, and norms. Functionalism holds merit for understanding functions in the workplace and norms at the youth-work interface.

By combining structuralism and functionalism, Giddens (1984) integrates two previously separate streams of thought in the social science literature: theories focusing on macro-social structures, such as structuralism, and those examining human interactions at a mid-level, such as functionalism. Nonaka and Toyama (2003), contend that social systems are produced and reproduced through social interaction. They view humans as role-taking and norm-fulfilling beings acting according to their images of reality.

A key concept of structuration theory is that human practices and activities are seen as ‘recursive,’ that is, “they are not brought into being by social actors, but continually recreated by them via the very means whereby they express themselves as actors” (Giddens, 1984, p.2). There

are elements of Giddens' (1984) recursive view of structures and actors that are useful at a conceptual level. Still, the inequality and skewed power relationships within structures must be acknowledged as youth transition to employment. Youth are influenced by the social structures surrounding them, but it is important to note that they often lack the power to shape these structures directly. Giddens (1984) explains that agency involves an individual's ability to influence or change existing situations or events. An individual is no longer regarded as an agent when they lose the ability to make an impact or exert control over their situation. Giddens' idea of agency is closely connected to Heidegger's concept of Dasein. According to Inwood (2019), Dasein allows individuals to respond to their circumstances and make choices about their existence.

Acknowledging that action exists within an environment of either power or limited power is important as it recognises unequal power dynamics in the workplace. Examining the power dynamics and what youth experience as they interact as social actors is critical to the research aims and objectives. Workplace support through occupational social work intervention and the support of diversity, equality and inclusion policies can address these complex issues. Veliquette (2013) agrees that structuration theory provides a framework for understanding the interplay between individuals and organisations and what is involved in creating and maintaining ideas and structures.

To assist in delving deeper into the systems that shape youth transition, the concept of situated practices espoused by Giddens will be explored. Giddens proposes that situated practices constitute “social systems consisting of patterns of reproduced relations between actors or

communities” (1981, p.26). Interactions between systems shape youth transitions, including training systems, peer relationships, supervisor/manager relationships and workplace policies (Howana, 2012). Structuration theory provides the framework to better understand how youth in transition interact with and navigate the essential structural dynamics such as economics, education policy, and significant family, manager, and peer relationships, that shape their transition to work. The research study would be incomplete without closely examining the theoretical constructs of work, specifically from the perspective of marginalised youth.

## **2.5 Theoretical Constructs of Work from the Perspective of Marginalised Youth**

Beer and Mulder (2020) offer a relational or interconnected view of work that extends beyond the activities that people produce. Their comprehensive framework includes the skills, tools, and technology, but of importance for this research study, as well as the relationships with customers, co-workers, and managers. Manuti et al. (2018, p.274) add another dimension, asserting that the meaning people attribute to work accounts for “personal values, expectations, beliefs and attitudes towards work.” The critical element of Manuti's (2018) definition is how youth experience work based on their attitude or beliefs about work; it also considers how prior life experiences influence these attitudes. Another critical dimension proposed by Ruiz-Quintanilla and Claes (2000) is that work provides status, social prestige, professional and personal identity, interesting social contacts, satisfaction, and economic autonomy. In reality, this idealistic view of work does not necessarily apply to entry-level employment in a call centre, as call centre work is often viewed as a stressful and socially unprestigious environment rather than a satisfying one (Harry & Coetzee, 2011; Jacobs & Roodt, 2011).

A marginalised youth lens on work provides a unique perspective on the experiences and challenges faced by young people transitioning into employment in South Africa. It allows for a deeper understanding of the systemic issues contributing to youth unemployment and provides a platform for their voices to be heard. This lens is essential for creating a fairer, more inclusive, and more equitable society. An understanding of how socio-economic status, education systems and demographic factors influence youth-to-work trajectories and outcomes is needed if large numbers of South African youth are to be employed (Ardington & Case, 2010; Ermisch et al., 2004; Thompson, 2011).

Workplaces mirror the societies in which they are found. Marginalised youth carry the scarring effect of long-term unemployment (Scarpetta et al., 2010), leading to feelings of worthlessness, shame, and social isolation (Branson et al., 2019; Henderson et al., 2017). Understanding the experience of employment for marginalised youth in South Africa, as well as the concomitant negative stereotypes and stigmatisation that youth experience, can shed light on the interface issues and challenges they are likely to face. The inequality in South Africa means that marginalised youth have an educational disadvantage when transitioning to work.

Silver (2021) discussed the difference between educational advantages and disadvantages, emphasising that the academic understanding of socio-economically disadvantaged youth is monolithic. The oversimplified view of educational advantage is carried over into the workplace, where adjustments for career transition do not consider all educational levels. Silver (2021) suggests that it is vital to consider the diverse experiences and backgrounds of disadvantaged young people since youth are not a homogenous group with the same set of challenges. This research contributes to developing a more nuanced understanding of



marginalised youth and their experiences and needs at work. The following section examines work from a systems perspective and explains why a holistic perspective is imperative for understanding youths' transition experiences.

### **2.5.1 Systems Theory and Work**

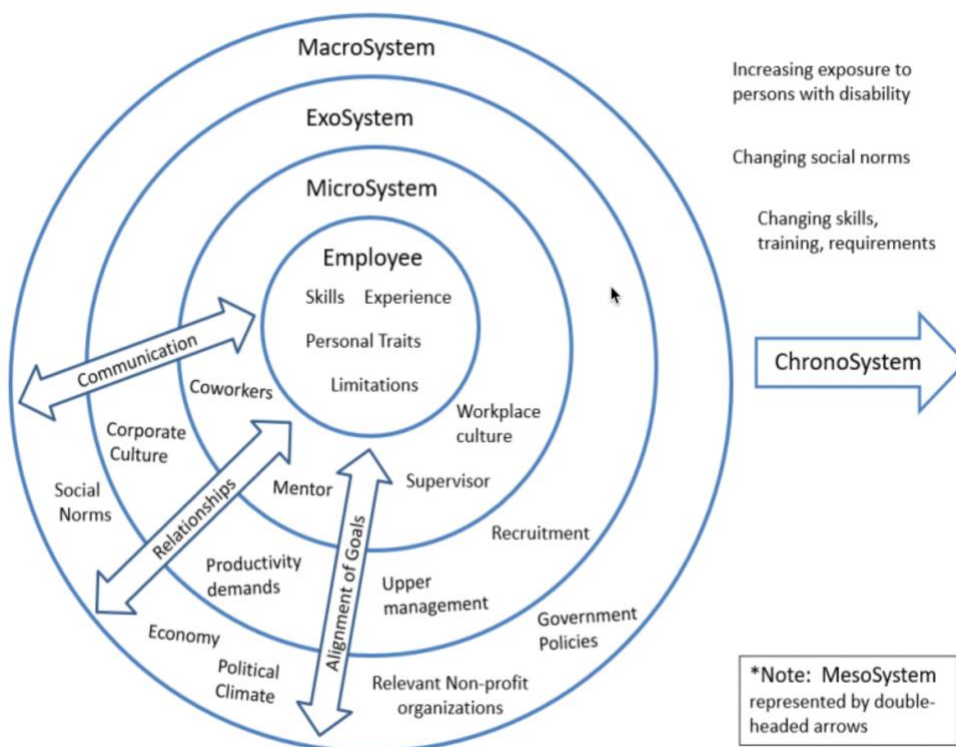
A systems perspective (Bronfenbrenner, 1979) of work environments highlights the socio-structural factors of the society that impinge on organisations and employees (Bäckman & Nilsson, 2016; Graham & De Lannoy, 2016; Mlatsheni & Rospabe, 2002). In addition to the challenges that marginalised youth face due to societal and structural factors, it is crucial to acknowledge and address workplace diversity issues and potential ethnic and racial biases that may exist for young employees (Umaña-Taylor et al., 2014). Working with customers, supervisors and managers from multicultural backgrounds adds complexity to the transition process. On the one hand, diversity makes for a rich multicultural environment. On the other hand, employees from differing economic backgrounds must negotiate complex relationships to find common ground. Coming to terms with one's inherent biases and attitudes in a rapidly changing, high-pressure environment requires intentional dialogue and professional support.

Bronfenbrenner's ecological systems theory (1979) offers a valuable framework for comprehending the intricate nature of work, diversity, and the societal systems from which young employees originate. Lőrinc et al. (2020) concur that understanding the interplay between complex systems and the pattern of activities, roles, and interpersonal relations that arise from this is valuable. Bronfenbrenner and Lőrinc's perspectives provide occupational social workers with a framework to comprehend the complex work patterns, call centre activities, and

interpersonal relationships involved in the youth work experience. In line with systems theory, work is not an independent activity. Instead, it is part of an interaction with multiple systems, including the social, cultural, and economic systems, that influence the work experience for youth in transition. This complex interplay of multiple systems forms the issues of the youth-work interface. Figure 2 illustrates the multiple systems that interact with and influence each other, including the micro-system, meso-system, exo-system and macro-system.

**Figure 2**

*Model of an Inclusive Workplace from an Ecological Work Perspective*



*Note.* This diagram represents the interaction of ecological systems and workplace factors that influence inclusivity. Reprinted from "Model of an inclusive workplace," by S. Doughty and

J. Moore, 2021, International Journal of Research in Business Studies and Management, 8(1), 7–14. <https://doi.org/10.22259/ijrbsm.0801002>. CC BY 4.0.

Doughty and Moore (2021) present an adapted version of Bronfenbrenner's model where the model is applied to the world of business and inclusion. Applying Bronfenbrenner's (1979) ecological systems theory places the youth employee at the centre. The meso-system level considers youth employees' navigation of interpersonal relationships, peer and informal networks, team dynamics, and supervision systems. Success at work is dependent on how youth navigate these relationships. The exo-system consists of the work systems, culture, and code. As Sennett (1998) postulated, the code or language of the workplace needs to be determined by young people, making it all the more complex to transition to work successfully. Youth need guidance and mentorship in cracking the working code to unlock success in work activities and have productive work relationships.

At the macro-system level, systems theory allows for conceptualising organisational structures, such as policies, technologies, and teams' roles in shaping the work experience of the youth. Negotiating day-to-day work experiences is framed around policies that youth may need help understanding. Ensuring clarity on important workplace policies empowers young employees to understand their rights and know the rules of the 'work game'. Broader macro-systems that organisations are found in, such as labour markets and policy, as well as the socio-economic systems, can be unpacked from an ecosystem framework. This approach offers valuable insights into how organisations and youth employees are nested in a larger complex

environment and must respond to changes in the broader ecosystem. An eco-system perspective is relevant for BPOs, given the competitive landscape in which they operate.

The reality for South African businesses and employees is that poor system linkages have created barriers to work and contribute to challenges in successful youth employment (Alam & de Diego, 2019; Ardington & Case, 2010; De Lannoy et al., 2018; Heintz & Posel, 2008). Employers find themselves at the interface of societal barriers to employment and business needs for suitable, competent employees. Nassar-McMillan et al. (2017) believe that organisational programmes for low-income and ethnic minority youth must be responsive to individual experiences of marginalisation. How marginalised youth negotiate societal barriers and engage with organisational programmes is based on how they view themselves in relation to work. Marginalisation, according to Mowat (2015), involves feeling excluded from society and the work community, and there is a deepened sense of being undervalued that marginalised youth must navigate. The following section examines the tension between the individual and structures at work through Giddens's (1993) structuration theory.

### **2.5.2            Structuration Theory and Work**

Giddens (1993) posited a crucial dichotomy between the agency of individuals and the social structures that constrain and enable their actions. This tension lies at the heart of interface issues at the workplace, emphasising the interplay between human agency and the societal and work structures that shape and are shaped by it. According to Giddens, while individuals can perform intentional actions as agents, their actions are continually shaped and constrained by the larger social context in which they exist. Structuration theory, when applied in the workplace,

recognises that human actions are shaped by the structures in which individuals operate and the agency of the individuals within those structures (Oppong, 2014).

There is tension between agency and organisational structures in marginalised youth's work environment, where social and economic structures limit youth employees' autonomy (Graham et al., 2019b). Côté and Bynner (2008) argued that individuals are not just passive products of social systems and structures, but that youth exercise the agency to accept or reject the negative identities imposed upon them. A study conducted by Baldry et al. (2019) demonstrated that despite facing difficult socio-economic and educational circumstances, numerous young people display considerable agency and determination to pursue opportunities to enhance their skills, even with limited information and financial resources. In a study of youth in a South African township, Theron (2007) noted that the traditional values of 'ubuntu' encouraged resilience among the township participants in her study. More research is needed on the relationship between ubuntu, resilience and agency as an adaptive coping mechanism for marginalised youth in South African call centres.

External forces, such as organisational policies and procedures, do not solely determine workplace experiences. The extant literature points to the choices and actions of individual employees' actions as being constrained and enabled by the structures and rules within the workplace (Giddens, 1984, 1990; Staber & Sydow, 2002; Stones, 2015; Veliquette, 2013).

However, Blustein et al. (2005) argue that many youth employees are not well equipped to be active agents, primarily because of structural inadequacies in their educational resources and vocational options. This finding is consistent with empirical studies on marginalised youth

experience in South Africa (Bray et al., 2010; De Lannoy et al., 2018; Graham et al., 2019b; Newman & De Lannoy, 2014), which found that youth had limited capacity to affect positive change given socio-structural constraints. Structuration theory recognises that while social structures for marginalised youth may limit options, youth who demonstrate positive behaviours can actively respond to the limited options and work demands to shape their work experience (Navarro-Abal et al., 2018). While there is a role that youth behaviour plays, the complexity of the youth transition landscape means that multi-level changes from employers to government are needed to effect positive youth experience.

## **2.6 Conclusion**

Examining the intersecting factors that create the marginalised youth experience is critical for employers interested in positive business outcomes and for occupational social workers developing person-in-environment interventions. Bridging the macro-micro divide by utilising both a systems and structuration theoretical framework allows for exploring the subjective experiences of youth at the interface and the systems that influence youth transition. This chapter focused on the theoretical underpinnings that framed the study. The next chapter will explore more fully the complex dynamics marginalised youth face as they transition to work.

## **CHAPTER THREE**

### **Towards an Understanding of the Complex Dynamics of Marginalised Youth**

#### **Transition to Work**

"Young people should be at the forefront of global change and innovation. Empowered, they can be key agents for development and peace. If, however, they are left on society's margins, all of us will be impoverished. Let us ensure that all young people have every opportunity to participate fully in the lives of their societies." (Kofi Annan Foundation, 2022, para. 1).

#### **3.1 Introduction**

This chapter examines what it means to be a young person in South Africa in order to understand the complex dynamics of marginalised youth's transition experiences. This includes understanding unemployment and marginalisation, a deep dive into youth identity formation, and the major theoretical influences on school-to-work transition from a marginalised youth perspective.

#### **3.2 Conceptualising Youth in South Africa**

How the term youth is conceptualised in literature has shaped the types of policies and interventions put in place to address the issues of youth unemployment. This section explores literature on age-based conceptions of youth, socio-cultural/milestone perspectives, and the concept of waithood that youth experience (Honwana, 2013). The conceptualisation of youth is seen from a developmental life stage approach that includes essential developmental elements

such as psychological, social, physical, contextual and cultural elements (Ekundayo-Thompson, 2012).

### **3.2.1 Aged-Based Conceptualisation of Youth**

Youth is commonly viewed as the period between childhood and adulthood. In policy and politics, youth is defined by age range. The UN defines youth as those between 15 - 24 years old (UN, 2015). In South Africa, youth is defined as those between the ages of 15 and 35 (Republic of South Africa, 2015). The reference to youth in this report has subscribed to the South African 15–35-year-old definition. The age-based definition of youth poses a significant challenge in policy development as this definition oversimplifies the understanding of youth (Honwana, 2013). The definition disregards the substantial differences in experiences between a 15-year-old and a 35-year-old. These disparities in age could lead to the development of ineffective policies and strategies that intend to cater to the needs of different age groups within the youth population.

Age categories are not seen as natural since they ignore cultural systems which encompass meanings and values (Anyidoho et al., 2012; Honwana, 2013). According to Honwana (2012), age categories are embedded in personal relationships, institutional structures, social practices, politics, law and public policies. A view of youth that includes the cultural and social systems encompassing the youth experience is more fitting. Burman (2016) puts forward that youthhood is seen not only as a transitional period from childhood to adulthood but also as a state of being that cannot be exclusively defined by age. Growing evidence suggests that an individual at the end of adolescence cannot be considered an adult when using exclusively physical, physiological, intellectual, social, emotional, and behavioural measures (Hochberg &



Konner, 2020). The complexity of the individual's social experience and behavioural maturity differs too extensively for the end of adolescence to be the sole marker of adulthood.

### **3.2.2                    Socio-Cultural: Milestone Conceptualisation of Youth**

Social scientists working in Africa have tended to define youth not as a particular age range but as a social category characterised by particular cultural views linked to roles, rights, and responsibilities (Durham, 2000; Honwana & De Boeck, 2005). Thorsen (2008) concurs with the view that youth should be seen as a social category that is historically and culturally constructed. Arnett (2000) has proposed a period of development called ‘emerging adulthood’, which encompasses the years beyond high school from 18 to 25. Arnett (2000) argues that rather than the age-based definition, traditional markers of entering true adulthood should be viewed according to the following: 1) accepting responsibility for yourself, 2) making independent decisions, and 3) becoming financially independent.

Youth is often described as a phase of life involving several transitions, from completing education to entering the labour market to leaving home (Biggart et al., 2011). Although many South African youth enter the labour market, their education remains incomplete, and they stay in the family home due to financial constraints. According to Berlin et al. (2010), the social construction of adulthood is less about the traditional demographic markers—home leaving, full-time work, and family formation—but more about the personal psychological self-assessments of “maturity.” While the milestone view improves on the age-based definition, it needs to demonstrate how individual maturity is considered and the relationships and economic factors unique to marginalised youth development. In South Africa, the factors that hinder the

attainment of the traditional adult markers need to be considered in the conceptualisation of the youth.

Cepa and Furstenberg (2021) have further challenged the milestone view of adulthood and found that the timing of these milestones differs considerably across social classes. The study by Cepa and Furstenberg (2021) highlights the continued need for institutional support for disadvantaged youth moving towards adulthood. This view is supported by Cohen et al. (2003) and Osgood et al. (2005, 2010), who remarked that the pathways to adulthood are strongly linked with social class and the resources and support of one's family of origin. The differing terms and ways in which youth has been defined bear testament to the complexity and broad range of theoretical dispositions that have come to underpin youth studies.

Socio-cultural or milestone perspectives of youth focus on the developmental changes during adolescence and young adulthood. This perspective considers the cultural and social contexts in which young people grow and develop. Young people's milestones include completing school, getting a job, and starting a family, markers of transition into adulthood (Ekundayo-Thompson, 2012). However, the sociocultural perspective alone does not account for the structural barriers young people face in accessing opportunities and resources necessary for a successful transition into adulthood (Honwana, 2013). According to Gallie (2004), sociocultural factors play a critical role in the transitions of at-risk youth into meaningful work associations. Honwana (2012, 2013) offers the concept of 'waithood' as a framework for understanding the African youth experience.

### **3.2.3 Waithood**

The concept of ‘waithood’ has emerged as a way of understanding the experiences of young people in the Global South who are unable to transition into adulthood due to limited opportunities and resources (Honwana, 2013). According to Honwana, waithood refers to the period of waiting that young people experience as they try to enter the job market or establish themselves as independent adults. This period of waiting is often characterised by frustration, uncertainty, and a sense of hopelessness (Honwana, 2013). The concept of waithood highlights the need for policy and practice to address the structural barriers that prevent young people from accessing opportunities and resources necessary for a successful transition into adulthood. Waithood reflects the precarious socio-economic conditions and the lack of employment prospects for young people (Singerman, 2007; Honwana, 2012, 2013).

Waithood involves a prolonged, involuntary suspension period between childhood and adulthood when many young people cannot progress to adulthood and become fully independent members of society (Honwana, 2012; Jeffrey, 2010; Singerman, 2007). This definition recognises the experience of the vast majority of youth in the underdeveloped world (Jeffery, 2010) and is fitting for understanding an African youth experience.

According to Berlin et al. (2010), there has long been a recognised delay in youth entering adulthood. These authors argue that the unintentional effect of the new timetable for adulthood may create a sense of entitlement and a lingering pattern of dependency (Berlin et al., 2010). During the transition from adolescence to adulthood, increasing maturity comes with expectations that one will take responsibility for oneself, make independent decisions, and

become self-sufficient (Arnett, 2000). South African youth are suspended in waithood, where they have limited opportunities to advance economically but experience the social and cultural pressure to complete their journey to adulthood (Honwana, 2012; National Development Report for 2030, 2012).

Honwana (2012, p. 21) points out that the youth period should be a “time of growth, of searching for meanings and belonging; a stage of moulding characters, interests, and goals; a process of constructing and reconfiguring identities; a creative period with both risks and possibilities”. While this idealistic view of the youth period should encompass the positive experiences associated with growth, including creativity and possibilities, this is sadly not true for many economically deprived youth.

Berlin et al. (2010) argue that attaining adult roles is more complex than it was three or four decades ago. Categories of youth needing special attention are school dropouts, students in tertiary institutions, unemployed and under-employed young people, female youth, pregnant adolescent youth, youth in crime, youth at risk, youth with disability and health challenges, and youth with special talents (Anyhido et al., 2012; Backes & Bonnie, 2019; ILO, 2024). In South Africa, the lack of economic support from one’s family of origin makes this transition justifiably challenging. The definition of youth should, therefore, ‘be constantly negotiated and adapted to the contexts they are actualised and generated within’ (Christiansen et al., 2006) To better understand the challenges youth experience in attaining adulthood, the following section expands on the youth unemployment literature.

### **3.3 Youth Unemployment: Globally and in South Africa**

Despite numerous long-term efforts to address global youth unemployment, the youth unemployment crisis has worsened. The picture is bleak worldwide, in 2018, it was forecast that 57.4 million young people between the ages of 15 and 24 would be unemployed by 2020, of which 13.6 million would be from the African continent (ILO, 2018).

The National Development Report for 2030 (NDP, 2012) summarises the South African situation well. According to the NDP report, South Africa is in a low-growth, middle-income trap with three key features reinforcing each other: low levels of competition for goods and services, low savings and large numbers of work seekers with poor skills profiles who cannot enter the labour market. This situation has resulted in a large youth population that is not employed, educated, or trained (NEET).

South African statistics indicate that 41,7% of young people aged 15-34 are not employed, educated, or trained (Statistics South Africa, 2020). Unemployment is one of the major factors that are standing in the way of South Africa's efforts to reduce poverty and inequality. Unemployment data released in June 2021 revealed that South Africa's unemployment rate increased to 32.6% and that the number of young people classified as NEET increased by 1.9% in the first quarter of 2021, representing a staggering 43.6% of our 24.4 million young people (Statistics South Africa, 2021). When unemployment data for the first quarter of 2021 was unpacked, approximately 54.8% of the unemployed had education levels below matric, while 35.4% comprised individuals with matric as the highest education qualification. In 2023, data showed that the total number of unemployed youth aged 15 -34 years

old was 4.9 million; this represents a rise in youth unemployment of 46.5% in the first quarter of 2023 (Statistics South Africa, 2023).

Youth unemployment is a significant issue in South Africa, particularly for black youth who face unfavourable living and social conditions (Oluwajodu et al., 2015). According to Mlatsheni and Rospabe (2002), the South African labour market has a high youth unemployment rate for the young and significant inequalities between age groups, races, and genders. South African employers, policymakers, and practitioners intervening in workplaces must be aware of the multiple inequalities facing African youth. A blanket approach based on Western formulations of youth identity and transition is not applicable in this context. Occupational social workers should adapt practice interventions that are adapted to the unique experiences of African youth.

The South African reality is that pervasive and enduring unemployment shapes the environment in which young people are launched into adulthood, with numerous youth facing challenging conditions on the road to independence. Unemployment locks young people out of the economic fabric of society, where they experience long-term involuntary exclusion and marginalisation. A UN (2012) report aptly describes the experience of youth unemployment as young people in an involuntary status of being unemployed but with the capacity, desire, and eligibility to work.

The UN (2012) description aligns with Honwana's (2012) definition of 'waithood' as a prolonged, involuntary period of suspension between childhood and adulthood, where adult

development markers are out of reach for the economically deprived. The mandate of occupational social work is to foster optimal adaptation between individuals and their environment (Department of Social Development, 2020). The state of affairs facing marginalised youth points to the critical need that occupational social work can play in addressing and working with all stakeholders to foster adaptation to work. In keeping with the phenomenological theoretical foundations of the research, the following section delves deeper into understanding what it means to be marginalised and NEET.

### **3.3.1 Understanding Marginalisation and NEETs'**

This section examines the felt experiences of marginalisation from a youth perspective. An in-depth understanding of the youth experience is aligned with Van Breda's (2009) emphasis on interface and the suitability of fit and environment. Gaining insight into what it feels like to be marginalised will allow workplace interventionists to create better initiatives that match the needs of marginalised youth.

#### **3.3.1.1 The Felt Experience of Marginalisation**

"To be marginalised is to have a sense that one does not belong and, in so doing, to feel that one is neither a valued member of a community and able to make a valuable contribution within that community nor able to access the range of services or opportunities open to others" (Mowat, 2015, p.457). According to Mowat's concept of marginalisation (2015), being marginalised is the condition of a lack of access to services and resources and the experience and feelings of being undervalued and not belonging to a group or community.

Employers at the youth-work interface must understand both the condition and the experience of marginalisation. The experience of 'not belonging' could negatively affect employees' outputs and level of engagement in the organisation and with clients. The understanding of marginalisation needs to move beyond the broad macro-explanation, which looks at the condition and structural implications but also needs to include the felt experience of marginalised youth.

Messiou (2012b) offers valuable insight into the felt experience of marginalisation by offering four distinct perspectives of marginalisation. Messiou differentiates between the experience of marginalisation, as perceived by oneself or others, and the acknowledgement of experience by self and others. Following Messiou's (2012b) perspective, marginalisation is not a single entity but has various conceptualisations dependent on the recognition and experience of marginalisation. These insights could be applied to the youth's relationship with their peers and employers. Understanding how the interaction between youth and employer experiences of marginalisation manifest in the workplace is the starting point for policy and practice interventions. Young people require the opportunity to understand and reflect on their own experiences of marginalisation, and employers and supervisors must reflect on their recognition or lack of recognition of marginalisation in the workplace. There is considerable work to be done in this area, and occupational social workers with a macro-micro level perspective on youth marginalisation and work interface issues can play a pivotal role in bridging the divide between youth and employers.



### **3.3.1.2 Marginalisation and Social Exclusion**

In a UN report, Yang et al. (2016) state that social exclusion describes a state where individuals cannot fully participate in economic, social, political and cultural life and refers to the process leading to and sustaining such a state. Essentially, socially excluded individuals are locked out of the opportunity to live fully functioning lives. This situation is a bleak state of affairs and an indictment on all stakeholders mandated to improve living conditions and create sustainable livelihoods. Likewise, occupational social workers have a responsibility to examine the role they play in addressing social exclusion and the ramifications associated with it. The World Bank (2013, p.4) defines social inclusion as “the process of improving the ability, opportunity, and dignity of disadvantaged people based on their identity to participate in society”. According to Ekundayo-Thompson (2012), youth marginalisation is attributed to a combination of factors, including poor governance, absence of social citizenship in basic welfare, high unemployment and urban-rural poverty.

Silver (2007) defines social exclusion as a dynamic process of progressive multidimensional rupturing of the ‘social bond’ at the individual and collective levels. Razer et al. (2013, p.1152) define social exclusion as a “state in which individuals or groups lack effective participation in key activities or benefits of the society in which they live.” According to Mowat (2015), individuals who don't have access to social networks and the associated trust and mutual exchange of resources can face social exclusion. Scarpetta et al. (2010) outline some causes of youth marginalisation, including social, political and economic forces; long periods of unemployment or NEET experiences; incomplete tertiary education; and a lack of funds to complete their studies. There is a lack of qualitative research on the felt experiences of the NEET

population and understanding how their engagement with their marginalisation impacts how they navigate the work transition phase of life. The following section examines the understanding of NEET challenges and how this may affect post-employment opportunities.

### **3.3.1.3 Effects of Marginalisation and Long-Term Neet Status**

Long-term unemployment can have detrimental effects on individuals, including poor mental health and social isolation, but in addition, it also places financial strain on government systems, with heightened public expenditures (Branson et al., 2019; Henderson et al., 2017). According to Dickens and Marx (2020), being NEET is said to have a strong negative impact on young people's physical, emotional, and psycho-social well-being and can lead to life-long negative socio-economic consequences, including chronic unemployment and poverty (Bäckman & Nilsson, 2016). Graham and De Lannoy (2016) explain that being NEET makes the youth highly vulnerable to social exclusion, chronic unemployment, and poverty.

The Department of Higher Education (2013) highlights that youth who are NEET pose a significant threat to South Africa's social stability. Unemployment, particularly over a long period, can have detrimental political and social consequences. Without job security, young people become vulnerable to poverty and social exclusion (Ermisch et al., 2004). A holistic grasp of the NEET experience aligns with Honwana's (2012) view that youth transitions should be understood within the specific conditions experienced by young people. Internationally, a multidisciplinary body of evidence indicates that being NEET, and especially remaining NEET for an extended period, is associated with deteriorating physical and mental health, substance abuse, precarious job prospects, discouragement in terms of participating in the labour market or education sector, social exclusion, and increased risk behaviour (Bäckman & Nilsson, 2016;

Chen, 2011; Franzen & Kassman 2005; Henderson et al., 2017; O'Higgins, 2015). Ardington and Case (2010) found that socio-economic status and educational attainment are negatively associated with depression. While robust evidence on the link between employment status and mental health exists in the international literature (Lund et al., 2018), this relationship is poorly understood in South Africa (Mlatsheni, 2012). Scarpetta et al. (2010) and Egdell and Beck (2020) warn of the long-term 'scarring effect' of prolonged periods of unemployment and how this influences transition into the labour market. The youth population boom affords Africa economic leverage if employers and helping professionals in the workplace are cognisant of the complex issues that youth face when youth are beginning their work journey.

Bynner and Parsons' (2002) study demonstrates how the quality of school-to-work transitions is linked to socio-economic statuses such as parental educational attainment and family conditions. Ermisch et al. (2004) postulate that NEET youth are more likely to become dependent on family and welfare support. Ballo et al. (2022) concur that early work experience, albeit informal, is a promotive factor for labour market entry; however, few studies have examined the relationship between early informal work experience and being NEET in South Africa. Considering the challenge that marginalised youth face and the importance of early work experiences highlighted by Ballo et al. (2022), innovative pathways into formal employment become crucial.

According to Anwar and Graham (2019), contact centres are a favourable way to enter formal sector employment, offering income, transportation, employment benefits, and recreational facilities. Many unemployed and undereducated young people are desperate to work but cannot secure stable employment or make enough money to live independently. Contact

centres could serve not only as an opportunity to gain much-needed skills, but also provide a stable income - not just for youth but also their families. The NEET youth experience in South Africa has been fraught with protests, uprisings, student strikes and general dissatisfaction with the youth state of affairs (Ntombana et al., 2023). This complex set of political and cultural experiences has shaped how youth transition is experienced. The South African government have actively sought to resolve unemployment through various policy formulations and economic interventions. The following section examines the historical youth policy landscape.

### **3.3.2 Youth Policy Formulation in South Africa**

While youth employment in South Africa is subject to considerable policy, research and practitioner interest, calls remain from government and civil society to intensify research and political and economic interventions to address this complex and pervasive phenomenon (Brenthurst Foundation, 2012; Filmer & Fox, 2014; Sumberg et al., 2021).

In South Africa, it is estimated that R135.9 billion was spent on post-secondary school training and job creation initiatives in 2018 (NTRSA, 2019). In 2018, the South African government allocated 27% (equivalent to ZAR 1.5 trillion) of its annual gross domestic product (GDP) towards implementing best-employment programmes (Ramaphosa, 2018). Supportive policy conditions for a growing youth population could mean economic leverage; similarly, countries without the necessary economic and political conditions could face adverse political and social ramifications due to unemployment. Despite various government initiatives aimed at addressing youth unemployment since 1994, including legislative frameworks and employment programs, South Africa continues to experience persistently high youth unemployment rates (De Lannoy et al., 2018).

A critical attempt by the South African government to address youth unemployment was through the Youth Employment Service (YES) initiative. Launched in 2018, YES aimed to provide young South Africans with job readiness training, work experience, and support in finding employment (YES4Youth, n.d.). The programme aimed to create one million jobs and work experiences for young people over a three-year period (Department of Trade and Industry, 2018). However, according to the Government Communications Information Services (2023), the YES programme had found job placements for only 100,000 South African youth by 2023, representing a 90% shortfall from its original target

The employment interventions appear ineffective; traditional solutions to address youth unemployment have had a minimal impact, with the number of unemployed young people increasing yearly (Statistics South Africa, 2020). The Independent Evaluation Group (IEG) reports that employment programmes, in general, are uncoordinated and function in isolation (IEG, 2013). According to some studies, non-graduates face a 55% probability of unemployment, while graduates have an 8% possibility of unemployment (Van Der Berg et al., 2016; Van Der Berg & Van Broekhuizen, 2012). Despite the glaring risk that non-graduates face compared to graduates, the literature on graduate employment and transition to employment has received more research and intervention. This research study contributes to the shortage of non-graduate youth data and research. In the following section, the significance of youth demographic change and the impact that this has on employment outcomes is addressed.

### **3.3.2.1 Population Trends and Youth Unemployment**

As introduced in chapter one, the growing youth population situation could increase youth unemployment rates and exacerbate the challenges that young people already face in accessing meaningful work. It is crucial to understand the impact of demographic change on youth employment and develop appropriate policies and interventions to address these growing challenges. According to a report by the United Nations (2019), the global population could grow to approximately 8.5 billion in 2030, 9.7 billion in 2050, and 10.9 billion in 2100. Based on UN projections, sub-Saharan Africa's population will continue growing, increasing to 1.7 billion by 2040, a 70 per cent increase. The population of the rest of the world is expected to increase by only about 16 per cent in 2040 (United Nations, 2015a).

While the rest of the world faces an ageing crisis, Africa faces a youth population explosion. A UN Population Report (2015b) estimated that Africa would experience a 44% increase in its youth population. World Bank calculations estimate that this demographic dividend could generate 11-15% GDP growth between 2011 and 2030 (Ahmed, 2015). However, governments and employers must be ready for the youth demographic change.

Agbor et al. (2012) point out that without the capacity to absorb and gainfully employ a growing youth cohort, countries face a far more insidious consequence of the youth bulge: with an increasing pool of idle and disaffected youths, the risk of both economic and political instability increases. The need to strategically support the growing youth population needs to be prioritised by all workplace professionals, especially social workers. Arias et al. (2019) point out

that even though Sub-Saharan Africa's growing working-age population constitutes a significant opportunity to reduce poverty and increase shared prosperity, the region's workforce is the least skilled globally, which can severely constrain economic prospects.

Africa must act urgently to improve labour markets by increasing human capital through education and training and by aggressively promoting job creation (Agbor et al., 2012; UN, 2015b). When a large youth group is educated and provided with sufficient opportunities for work, the bulge becomes a boon for development. This sentiment is supported by a comprehensive study conducted by the International Monetary Fund, which states that the right supportive policies, including those fostering human capital accumulation and job creation, need to be in place to translate this opportunity into concrete economic growth and a boon for development (Drummond et al., 2014). The conditions for a sustained transition to employment are crucial for youth and the organisations employing them. Without sufficient support and resources, youth may struggle to navigate the transition to employment, leading to higher rates of unemployment and disengagement. On the other hand, organisations that invest in supporting youth during this transition can benefit from a more engaged and productive workforce.

Countries with increasing youth populations have been encouraged by the UN to help young people access services, gain skills, and build relationships to ensure a healthy transition into adulthood (UN, 2015a). The International Labour Organisation (ILO) Centenary Declaration for the Future of Work calls upon the ILO to direct its efforts to, among other things, developing effective policies aimed at generating full, productive and freely chosen employment and decent work opportunities for all and, in particular, facilitating the transition from education and

training to work, with an emphasis on the effective integration of young people into the world of work (ILO, 2020). The operative phrase in the above declaration and the focus of this research report is ‘facilitating the transition from education and training to work’, emphasising the effective integration of young people into the world of work.

A research study conducted by the International Labour Organisation from 1999 -2019 shows that the number of youth employed has decreased by 71 million. Trends for 2020 show that at the start of this new decade, the target to meaningfully reduce the global proportion of youth not in employment education or training (NEET) will be missed, highlighting the need to redouble efforts to generate decent jobs for the next generation of workers (ILO, 2020).

Occupational social workers are equipped to change systems and contexts as they are skilled in macro-level practice, such as administration, policy practice, and community organising (Nandan et al., 2015). They are likewise equipped and trained to understand the holistic individual group and socio-structural dynamics impeding successful youth employment outcomes. While social workers acknowledge the importance of addressing unemployment, their active role in advocacy or intervention in youth employment initiatives still needs to be improved, as evidenced in the literature (Department of Social Development, 2020; Iversen, 2001). Occupational social workers need to establish clearer roles and show more concerted efforts in dealing with youth unemployment. A comprehensive model of practice that recognises and integrates occupational social work contributions can address this issue.



In the next section, the classic developmental perspectives of Erikson (1980) and Bronfenbrenner (1979) are used to understand better how the complex social-cultural milieu that youth reside in influences youth identity development in South Africa. Given the phenomenological underpinnings of the study, a focus on the meaning of experiences and what constitutes the meaning of experience is discussed. An expansion on youth identity formation is necessary to widen the research lens on marginalised youth. According to Fassinger (1991), identity theories aid clients and professionals in understanding, predicting, and normalising experiences and identifying difficulties that may stem from developmental processes and tasks.

### **3.4 Youth Identity Formation: A South African Youth Experience**

According to Masdonati et al. (2021), transitioning from school to work is a crucial developmental task that emerging adults have to navigate, along with other life transitions that come with moving towards adulthood. Social identity scholars argue that work represents a primary source of identity formation (Ashforth & Mael, 1989; Tajfel & Turner, 1986; Umaña-Taylor et al., 2014) and social belonging. Social identity theory in this research report draws on the classic work of Tajfel (1974) as well as the work of Umaña-Taylor et al. (2014), who highlight how ethnic and racial identity influence a person's experience of work.

Social identity theory, as defined by Hogg et al. (1995), is a social psychological theory that provides insight into intergroup relations, group processes, and the social self. It offers a lens through which the dynamics of group behaviour can be examined and has been widely studied and applied in various academic fields such as sociology, psychology, and organisational behaviour (Ashforth & Mael, 1989; Tajfel & Turner, 1986; Umaña-Taylor et al., 2014).

Social identity theory helps understand the role of peers and young employees' relationships with supervisors as they transition and integrate into work. The roles, work environment and field of work that young people enter into shape their personal and collective identities during this developmental stage (Erikson, 1980; Tajfel, 1974; Galliher et al., 2017; Marcia, 1966; Phinney, 2000). The experience of holding a job and being recognised as a valued member of the workforce can contribute to a positive self-image. The literature suggests that contact centre work is monotonous and stressful (Anantharaja, 2009; Budhwar et al., 2009; Sengupta, 2011; Sprigg & Jackson, 2006). Research efforts are needed to understand better the relationship and impact of stressful, high-pressure call centre work on youth self-identity. Social identity theory sheds light on the intricate relationship between work, identity, and social belonging, particularly in complex and stressful work and socio-economic conditions.

Oyserman and Destin (2010) suggest that identities can be seen as scripts and meaning-making systems that guide action and shape experiences. Scripts, or how youth make meaning of their identity, are created through the environment, social interactions and personal experiences. Socio-structural factors such as race, class, gender, sexuality, religious beliefs and others have an intricate influence on how young individuals perceive their identity, sense of belonging and citizenship (Naidoo et al., 2015). For workplace interventionists working with marginalised youth, it is important to understand the impact of socio-structural factors on youth identity. The following section expands on the link between socio-structural factors and youth identity formation based on Erikson's (1980) and Bronfenbrenner's (1979) developmental perspectives.

### **3.4.1 Erikson on Youth Identity**

In social science literature, Erik Erikson's (1980) classical work has influenced conceptualisations of youth identity studies for more than six decades (Schwartz, 2001). According to Erikson, individuals cannot be understood apart from their social context. “Individual and society are intricately woven, dynamically related in continual change” (Erikson, 1980, p.114). Hoare (2002) notes that Erikson was one of the first theorists to recognise the influence of culture on development.

The transition to adulthood involves interactions, interconnections, and mutual influences among such life domains as education, employment, and parenting (Gore et al., 1997; Maughan & Champion, 1990). Expanding on the work of Erikson (1980), Marcia (1966) described identity formation during adolescence as involving both exploration and commitment with respect to ideologies and occupations (e.g., religion, politics, career, relationships, gender roles). Erikson's (1980) and Marcia's (1966) views of youth identity are in line with Bronfenbrenner's theoretical approach (Bronfenbrenner, 1979). While this classic work did not, at the time of its development, refer to ‘structuration’ as it is known today, it is a relevant antecedent of structuration theory. Next, social identity theory is discussed with a focus on how this shapes the transition to work.

### **3.4.2 Social Identity Theory**

Social identity theory was initially formulated to examine racism, prejudice and discrimination (Tajfel & Turner, 2004). According to Hogg et al. (1995, p.259), social identity theory is a “social psychological theory of intergroup relations, group processes, and the social self.” According to social identity theory, identities are developed and maintained by various

underlying socio-cognitive processes, most notably categorisation, stereotyping and de-personalisation, by which people assign themselves and others to social groups (Brown, 2021). Umaña-Taylor et al. (2014) suggest that ethnic and racial identity becomes part of a person's psychological platform for negotiating employment and career choice. In South Africa specifically, the social phenomena of race and class are central to the normative development of marginalised youth.

Social identity theory could help explain the impact of manager-employee relationships and peer-to-peer relationships on identity formation for recently employed youth. Social identity theory considers the cognitive processes in identity development and examines how group processes and relationships impact identity development. Individuals are motivated to develop positive social identities based on group membership (Tajfel, 1974; Tajfel, 1978a; Tajfel & Turner, 2004). To this end, Galliher et al. (2017) proposed that an integrative model for investigating identity processes and content in historical and contemporary contexts of prejudice and oppression of minoritised youth. Galliher et al.'s (2017) model helps raise awareness of the interplay between context and identity issues needed for occupational social workers to create effective and holistic interventions. In summary, it is acknowledged that identity theories inform the understanding of the transition process itself. The next section explores youth transition from a conceptual to a theoretical basis and examines what a successful transition looks like for South African youth.

### **3.5 Youth Transition to Employment**

The school-to-work transition process has received research attention from major development institutions, including the Organisation for Economic Co-operation and

Development (OECD) in several significant publications (OECD, 1998a, 1999, 2000, 2005). The transition process from unemployment or waithood to employment in sub-Saharan Africa has received less research attention. The study conducted by Fares et al. (2005) provides a comprehensive overview of the school-to-work transition processes by examining school-to-work data in thirteen countries. This study provides a firm background for understanding African transition experiences and factors affecting youth in Africa; however, this did not include South Africa, pointing to a further dearth in the South African episteme.

### **3.5.1 Conceptualising Transition to Employment**

There have long been international calls to focus on youth's transition needs. The ILO Centenary Declaration for the Future of Work, adopted by ILO constituents on the occasion of the Centenary of the ILO (June 2019), calls upon the ILO to direct its efforts to, among other things, developing effective policies aimed at generating full, productive and freely chosen employment and decent work opportunities for all, and in particular facilitating the transition from education and training to work, with an emphasis on the effective integration of young people into the world of work. The homogenous conceptualisation of transition detracts from a grounded theoretical understanding of what transition means, i.e., what age group this transition refers to and what contexts youth are transitioning from. A one-size-fits-all approach to transition does not consider the unique social and cultural experiences of the youth transition journey.

According to a report by the Mastercard Foundation, there is no precise definition of school-to-work transition in terms of its duration, start endpoints (Laterite, 2019). Without a clear definition and contextual comprehension of school-to-work transitions, it can pose

difficulties for researchers, practitioners, and employers seeking appropriate supportive services for marginalised youth.

In Europe, the school-to-work transition is defined as the process of moving from education or training to employment. However, it does not assign any attributes to the quality of employment. Meanwhile, the ILO uses a stricter definition of school-to-work transition: the passage of a young person from the end of schooling to the first stable or satisfactory employment (Mehran, 2016). An African definition of school-to-work transition has not been found in the literature. However, Honwana's (2012) term *waithood* provides a helpful explication of the transition process for African youth. Honwana (2012) cautions that the transition to adulthood can no longer be taken for granted as an orderly process by which young people attain personal autonomy and social recognition.

Stokes and Wyn (2007) maintain that the term transition provides a limited and outmoded conceptual frame for understanding young people's engagement with work and learning. They suggest that notions of transition that inform current youth policy focus primarily on outcomes and that a re-conceptualisation of transition as a dynamic, idiosyncratic, non-linear process of identity development might offer a more helpful way of thinking about young people's experiences as they move through the later stages of schooling to further education and employment. The school-to-work transition experiences and social integration of youth are a complex milieu of elements (Oluwajodu et al., 2015), such as cultural tradition, history, social demands, hopes, and individual prospects.

The term bounded or constrained agency acknowledges that individual decision-making during the transition may be constrained by macro-social structures, which may be a valuable way to understand marginalised youth's transition challenges (Evans, 2007). Transitioning from school into the labour market is critical in a young person's life, and the inability to do so may have long-term socio-economic effects (Dickens & Marx, 2020). Similar to a lack of definition for school-to-work transition, the theoretical underpinnings appear likewise lacking. To add depth to the school-to-work transition discussion, the theoretical influences of youth transition are expanded on further in the next section.

### **3.5.2. Theoretical Influences on School-to-Work Transition (SWT)**

School-to-work studies draw on several different theoretical frameworks. Herr (1999) points out that the school-to-work process has received limited theoretical grounding. Lent and Worthington (1999) state that while social learning theory, person-environment fit, and developmental and cognitive theories help understand youth, they do not provide a robust theoretical foundation for understanding SWT. These theories are useful as a framework that underpins research studies on SWT but must be used with complementary social identity and socio-economic theories.

Takeuchi et al. (2021) state that an “organisation-driven” perspective has dominated newcomer socialisation and successful school-to-work transition. Little is known about the specific experiences of first-time work seekers. This is evidenced by the lack of theoretical research on the mechanisms and structures facilitating successful transitions from school to work for vulnerable young people (De Luca et al., 2012). An organisational and employee focus is

needed to balance the workforce experience. Acknowledging the transition needs of African employees requires a shaper research focus. The role of social class in career development and transition is discussed in the following section.

### **3.5.3 Social Class and Youth Transition to Work**

Much of the school-to-work and career theory literature has focused on the educationally advantaged (Bailey & Merritt, 1997). Thompson (2011) reports that young people from a low socio-economic status background are significantly more likely to experience episodes outside of education than their high socio-economic status peers. The educationally advantaged have more choice or agency regarding career choices. The career options open to educationally advantaged compared to marginalised youth differentiate the transition experience and the support required between the two groups. According to Honwana (2012), waithood is not about geography but essentially about inequality. Educational inequality surfaces in the work context and needs to be addressed with African youth in mind, not through the implementation of Western-based work socialisation interventions

A global research focusing on social class's impact on school-to-work transition rather than transitions differentiated by country and region may prove valuable in understanding the exclusion experiences of youth. While there have been many practical efforts, there needs to be more theoretical work on the mechanisms and structures that facilitate successful transitions from school to work for vulnerable youth (Versnel et al., 2011; Watson & McMahon, 2006). Explanatory theories of careers as stages and transitions must give way to flexible, individually driven and adaptive strategies that encourage young people to make the best of the scarce



opportunities available for entry-level positions. Moreover, employers and workplace helping professionals need to adapt the current support to match the needs of younger marginalised populations. Carter (2015) concurs that educators and career advisers must build new support models to promote adaptation to less predictive situations.

The following section examines the components of a successful transition from school-to-work and whether the term ‘successful’ is useful for understanding the marginalised youth experience.

#### **3.5.4 What Constitutes Successful Youth-to-Work Transition**

According to De Luca et al. (2012), successful school-to-work transitions are those in which at-risk students experience resilient contexts that address their adversity and lead to labour market attachment. While De Luca is referring to the support required for students, similarly, employers and workplace helping professionals need to ensure that supportive measures are in place that are tailored to at-risk youth employees. Vulnerable youth can successfully transition to adulthood if society provides the support that suits their circumstances (Osgood et al., 2010). However, Honwana (2012) cautions against using the terms ‘successful and unsuccessful’ transition to work. She argues that “failed transitions” should be abandoned because it places the blame on young people rather than the system failing them. This is especially true in the BPO context, where stressful work environments and high targets leave a ‘work readiness’ gap. While the enthusiasm to meet work demands is there, young employees need a long time to adapt and ready themselves for the work environment. Rather than the term ‘successful and unsuccessful’, a more appropriate term for at-risk youth may be a staggered or staged school-to-work transition,

including customised timelines and support design with the youth population ‘work readiness’ at the forefront.

Human capital programmes aimed at active labour market policies and interventions (ALMP/I’s), which support and create employment opportunities for young people, are needed (Alam & de Diego, 2019). The South African government has encouraged organisations to employ youth through initiatives such as the employment tax incentive (ETI). The ETI was launched in 2014 by the National Treasury and aims to address youth employment by reducing the cost of hiring young workers (Ebrahim et al., 2019). While there has been a focus on creating employment, attention also needs to be given to supporting at-risk youth once they have been employed. Sustained and gainful employment focusing on youth employees’ long-term career prospects is missing.

According to Nilsson (2017), most evidence from school-to-work transitions is based on data from high-income countries. There is limited data from developing countries. South African youth face several entry barriers, including socio-economic, educational, and geographic barriers. The need for research focused on the issues facing school-work transition in South Africa is supported by De Lannoy et al. (2018), who point out that apartheid-era spatial planning continues to affect young people’s ability to search for and enter jobs. Therefore, examining transition issues from a South African perspective is much needed.

Lack of networks, experience, and requisite skill sets keep young people locked out of employment opportunities (De Lannoy et al., 2018; Haider, 2016). A case study undertaken by

Altbeker (2015) showed that employers could not find entry-level employees with basic work readiness skills; young employees lacked an understanding of the demands of the workplace. It was reported that they had low attendance levels and poor punctuality; their ability to take instructions and work in teams was also inadequate.

According to Nassar-McMillan et al. (2017), programmes for low-income and ethnic minority youth should be responsive to individual experiences of marginalisation, explore barriers to career development and focus on educational and vocational goals. Addressing the inequalities in South African society requires continued intentional efforts from multiple stakeholders. Herr (1999) identifies three components of school-to-work transition: 1) the human resource development in the secondary school phase, 2) the transition processes that connect schooling and employment, and 3) induction and adjustment into the workplace. According to Herr's (1999) categorisation, intervention at various transition points is required. Occupational social workers could potentially intervene in the secondary school phase, act as 'Transition Counsellors/Coaches', and intervene in the way of bespoke workplace interventions. Herr's (1999) model negates the experiences of marginalised youth. Since the present research focuses on marginalised youth's transition to work experience, a fourth component to Herr's (1999) categorisation is proposed. This post-employment NEET transition should be a staggered or staged transition to the first employment experience.

Social science researchers who have addressed the conceptual basis of school-to-work transition have done so either through a macro-level perspective or through a micro-level perspective. Macro-level frameworks emphasise systemic structures as key in influencing young

people's transition to work, whereas micro-level frameworks emphasise individual and personal factors as influential to their engagement in the labour market (De Luca, 2012; Giddens, 1976; Goldspink & Kay, 2004). A study of Latino youth showed that the transition to work is influenced by several internal and external contexts, including educational experiences, cultural and family influences, and perceptions of barriers to educational and vocational goals (Constantine et al., 2007). In South Africa a more nuanced view of the macro-, meso- and micro-factors impinging on at-risk youth is required. Bell and Blanchflower (2011) rightly point out that without a concerted effort at both the conceptual and practical levels, we will continue to face the challenge of disengaged youth on paths to social exclusion.

### **3.6 Conclusion**

Chapter three has explored the concept of youth from an age-based or milestone perspective. It discussed the impact of unemployment or delayed employment on youth's transition to work, as well as the South African macro-policy landscape and youth population trends. Honwana's (2013) concept of waithood was examined to understand better the period of waiting or delayed employment that young people in South Africa experience. Specific attention was given to what it means to be marginalised, or NEET and how the felt experiences of marginalisation impact the transition to work. To expound on the phenomenological research, the approach adopted psychological theories of youth identity formation and what school-to-work transition means, both from an individual perspective. This chapter sought to balance the micro and macro-perspectives on youth unemployment. The subsequent literature chapter focuses on the organisation and employment aspects of transition by examining what decent and meaningful employment means for marginalised youth.

## **CHAPTER FOUR**

### **Decent and Meaningful Employment for Marginalised Youth**

#### **4.1 Introduction**

This chapter delves into interface issues within the work environment. Van Breda (2009, p.284) refers to “goodness of fit between employees, families, communities and the workplace.” Similarly, Beer and Mulder (2020) refer to interface issues as the interconnected relationships that young people experience in the workplace. Building on these terms, this chapter expands on the issues of interconnected work relationships and ‘goodness of fit’ at the youth-work interface.

The first part of the chapter examines the tenets of decent and meaningful work to establish a theoretical foundation. In addition to this, the ILO’s (1999) definition of decent work is examined through four strategic objectives: 1) access to decent and productive work, 2) the promotion of rights at work, 3) active social dialogue, and 4) social protection. To better understand marginalised youth’s work experience, the meaning of work (MOW) framework and psychological working theory are discussed. Throughout the chapter, the interrelationships between key stakeholders and marginalised youth are given attention.

#### **4.2 Towards a Conceptualisation of Decent and Meaningful Work for Marginalised Employees**

Blustein et al. (2023, p.219) differentiate between decent and meaningful work by stating that “decent work reflects basic workplace conditions to which all employees are entitled, whereas meaningful work is aspirational, reflecting significance at work.” The concept of decent

work was launched in 1999 by the Director-General of the International Labour Conference (ILO) meeting in its 87th Session (Ghai, 2003). Decent work is a key objective of the UN's Sustainable Development Goals (SDGs), specifically Goal 8, which emphasises the importance of decent work for all (ILO, 2021).

Spooner and Waterman (2015) view the ILO's concept of decent work as an uncritical response to neo-liberalisation. A band-aid conceptualisation of decent work for all can't be put on the broad and deep socio-structural wounds that have characterised current labour market practices. In addition, and relevant to this research study, is the BPO's approach to balancing the global supply chain's profit-driven approach and the marginalised employees' need for supportive policy and interventions. Brill (2021) argues that the application of neo-liberal policies is evident in the global supply chain, where minimum labour standards or the 'social floor' give way to precarious work. The ILO's 'loose' definition of decent work gives multinational corporations leeway to avoid addressing precarious work conditions in their supply chains.

Breakfast (2014) likewise cautions against neo-liberal practices and policies, stating that the tendency to prioritise wealth accumulation over social welfare perpetuates inequalities and threatens democratic principles. Similarly, Seekings and Nattrass (2015) warn of a precarious situation in post-Apartheid South Africa, where neoliberal policies such as trade liberalisation have been adopted. While the principles espoused by the ILO (1999) for decent work are valuable, a more critical and contextual understanding of how these principles affect workplace policy and employees is needed.

An opportunity exists for diplomatic occupational social workers to advocate for an employee-driven agenda that balances the people-profit debate. Occupational social workers at the coalface of youth-work settings must adapt and critically examine their practice to ensure that workplace policies reflect the needs of work communities. A critical approach to how work is experienced by youth is essential in contact centres. Brill (2021) argues that the ILO's concept of decent work should be enhanced by focusing on the lived experience of the individual worker.

Blustein et al. (2016) concur that the ILO's focus on macro-economic data masks the spread of precarious work at an individual level. Empirical phenomenological research, such as this study, complements macro-economic data with rich employee-focused qualitative data.

The following section examines the classic work from the ILO (1999) which espouses four of the decent work objectives. This discussion contributes to the understanding and relevance of decent work in the BPO sector. The ILO definition of decent work (1999, p.6) is reflected in four strategic objectives: “1) access to decent and productive work, 2) the promotion of rights at work, 3) active social dialogue, 4) social protection.” A detailed discussion of these attributes will follow in the subsequent sections.

#### **4.2.1 Access to Decent and Productive Work**

According to the ILO (1999), decent work includes a concerted effort by governments and policy officials to create jobs by ensuring that reasonable opportunities exist for individuals striving to work. The South African government has a long history of job creation with advanced policy efforts in the BPO sector (Alam & de Diego, 2019; Dieltiens et al., 2015; Ebrahim et al.,

2019). The BPO sector is a critical driver of economic growth and employment (Anwar & Graham, 2019). Lacity et al. (2012) note that South Africa is considered a mature BPO destination with diverse skills, strong country and technological infrastructure, and substantial government support.

In 2017, there were about 228,642 people employed in the sector, with just over 38,600 in its offshore segment (Business Process Enabling South Africa - BPESA, 2018). Whitehead et al. (2023) point out that during the COVID-19 pandemic, the BPO sector in South Africa was able to attract considerable international investment and, in so doing, was able to generate jobs in the sector during a period of economic uncertainty. This sustained sector growth during the COVID-19 pandemic attests to the robustness and high value that the sector plays in addressing youth unemployment.

According to the annual Strategic Advisory, South Africa was the most favoured offshore customer experience location in 2021, after three consecutive years in second place (Ryan Strategic Advisory, 2021; Williams & Pritchard, 2022). However, while there is notable growth in the sector, the quality of call centre work has come into question. According to Anwar and Graham (2019), there is concern about the nature of jobs in the sector and whether these can be seen as jobs that can lead to career progression. The Global Services Sector (GBS) Masterplan was announced by the Department of Trade and Industry. The three labour goals in the GBS Masterplan consist of 1) fair working conditions and employment practices, 2) implementation of a decent work framework for the sector, and 3) training of workers and promotion of a stable work environment (Whitehead et al., 2023).



According to Whitehead et al. (2023), the BPO sector growth plan for growth needs to emphasise job quality. The authors caution that emphasis on job creation and opportunity creation in GBS supply chains may result in poor working conditions and low job quality. This view is in line with the caution echoed by Brill (2021) that neo-liberal policies could compromise labour standards in the global supply chain. Occupational social workers and academic activists who champion the cause of the marginalised must hold private and government sectors accountable for the working conditions and job quality in the BPO sector. While the above master plan points to the need to establish a decent work framework, the current state of decent work in South Africa and more so in the South African supply chains, is unknown. Exploring decent work benchmarking per sector requires academic and research input for international decent work standards to be met. The next objective of decent work outlined by the ILO (1999) is promoting workers' rights.

#### **4.2.2 Promotion of Workers' Rights**

According to the ILO (1999), the second objective of decent work is to promote fundamental rights at work and protect workers' rights through legal frameworks. In South Africa, legislation such as the Employment Equity Act of 1998, Promotion of Equality and Prevention of Unfair Discrimination Act of 2000, and Black Economic Empowerment Act of 2003, amongst others, were enacted to transform workplaces and provide access to equal opportunities and to prevent discrimination against employees (Employment Equity Act, 1998 Promotion of Equality and Prevention of Unfair Discrimination Act, 2000; Broad-Based Black Economic Empowerment Act, 2003). Marginalised employees transitioning to the workforce

have limited information on their basic rights in the workplace and need the tools to engage with workplace policy language. Occupational social workers can play an important advocacy role in supporting youth in understanding workers' rights, as well as workplace policies and processes.

#### **4.2.2.1 Role of Trade Unions**

According to Benner (2006), a central issue in promoting workers' rights in the South African call centre industry is the limited presence of trade unions. Most call centres remain non-unionised, while a collective bargaining agreement covers only 40% of the global contact centres, and only 25% of centres in South Africa are covered by a collective bargaining agreement (Benner, 2006). Apart from Benner's (2006) summary of the South African union presence, there is presently limited literature and few statistics available on the presence of unions in the call centre industry, so further empirical research is needed. Anwar and Graham's (2019) study shows that only one participant in 34 of their study of contact centres was a member of the Communications Workers Union (CWU). The CWU is making attempts to organise workers in contact centres in South Africa; however, Anwar and Graham (2019) report that most workers are unaware of the presence of unions for contact centres.

Social workers have an important advocacy role in ensuring that workers' rights are protected. Reisch (2013) argues that social workers must reimagine their relationships with key stakeholders such as government, clients, and communities and in so doing they could maintain their relevance and effectiveness. To effectively fulfil their advocacy role, occupational social workers must deeply comprehend the complex relationships between society, labour, and management in various industries. This understanding is crucial in a post-pandemic society, where these interface issues are even more prevalent. As Ramanathan (1991) noted, having a

clear understanding of these relationships is crucial for social workers to make a positive impact in their field. Understanding worker rights closely correlates to the next concept of decent work, which is active social dialogue.

#### **4.2.3 Active Social Dialogue**

The ILO (1999) views social dialogue as involving negotiation, consultation or exchange of information between, or among, representatives of government, workers and employers on issues of common interest relating to economic and social policy. Brill (2021) views the use of the term ‘social dialogue’ as political correctness on the part of the ILO. According to the author, terms that point to the explicit rights of trade unions, such as freedom of association and collective bargaining, are more appropriate. While there is a place for social dialogue in the form of consultation and information exchange, there is more of a need to address and challenge the structural imbalances that make decent work attainment a pipe dream. Focusing on trade union terminology such as ‘collective bargaining’, which is historically aligned with workers’ rights, is more appropriate for the BPO sector. Studies on decent work support the idea that structural factors predict decent work attainment (Duffy et al., 2016).

In South Africa, Business Process Enabling South Africa (BPESA) plays a vital role in promoting active social dialogue. BPESA’s mission is to promote domestic and foreign investment into the Global Business Services (GBS) sector in South Africa and work with its partners to stimulate economic growth, new job creation and skills development (BPESA, n.d). From a social dialogue perspective, BPESA acts as a liaison between industry members and local, provincial, and national governments, where the industry body actively lobbies for policy

alignment and other support measures for BPO sector development. While BPESA plays an important ‘external’ social dialogue role with industry partners, the ‘internal’ social dialogue between employers and employees could be strengthened.

Occupational social workers, human resource practitioners and other trained workplace interventionists should take advantage of the opportunity to direct and support employer-employee engagement initiatives. A macro-practice role can be attained if occupational social workers gain credibility in the workplace through successful micro- and meso-level interventions and the strategic building of key stakeholder relationships. Ramanathan (1991) posits that social workers in in-house programmes can advocate and bring about organisational changes by influencing human resource managers on job enrichment and redesign. Innovative social dialogue as an intervention to ensure healthier adaptation of employees to their environment is a core tenet of the profession. The next segment discusses social protection, which is a critical component of the decent work framework.

#### **4.2.4 Active Social Protection**

Social protection, according to the ILO (1999), ensures that employees have access to safe working conditions, sufficient free time, rest, considerations for family and social values, compensation in case of lost or reduced income, and access to adequate healthcare. According to Lent and Brown (2006; 2013), creating fair and supportive work environments can help marginalised youth build confidence in their abilities and prospects. Call centre work has been characterised as repetitive, stressful and emotionally draining, with employees experiencing high levels of burn-out (Anantharaja, 2009; Benner et al., 2007; Budhwar et al., 2009).

Presbitero et al. (2023) reviewed 47 empirical studies, and only one covered work-life balance; none of the articles covered employee support or interventions to support the development of leaders in the industry. Hechanova's (2013) study found that work-life conflict influenced employees' intention to leave the organisation. No clear standards define a safe and healthy youth work environment (Anwar & Graham, 2019). There is an opportunity for workplace activists and helping professionals to play a necessary support and advocacy role in ensuring that the tenets of decent work are featured on the BPO management agenda. While this study focused on the general experiences of youth employees, further empirical research, which points to the explicit tenets of decent work, could shed more light on the experience of decent work in contact centres.

Hauf (2015, p.150) suggests that decent work is not straight forward but instead views decent work as a “contradictory ensemble of competing economic imaginaries.” Examining issues of decent work is critical to understanding the youth-work interface, and continued rigorous research and practice debate are needed to influence big business's profit-driven agenda. Brill (2021) believes that rather than rejecting the concept of decent work, new and better research initiatives are needed to identify interventions to enable more of the world's workforce to enjoy decent work. In line with Brill's assertion, there is a clear role that occupational social workers can play in both in terms of new research and innovative interventions.

Blustein et al. (2023) add to the decent work debate by adding the concept of meaningful work to the rhetoric; according to Blustein, meaningful work includes significant and

aspirational work. The following section highlights meaningful work and how marginalised youth experience ‘meaningfulness’.

### **4.3 Meaningful Work for Marginalised Youth**

According to Rosso et al. (2010), the meaning of work (MOW) literature is the product of a long tradition of rich inquiry spanning many disciplines. Meaning of work scholars have considered various factors influencing perceptions of meaning and meaningfulness, ranging from individual attitudes to organisational values, to spiritual connections (Levels et al., 2022; Rosso et al., 2010). Manuti et al. (2018) postulate that the meaning of working is a multi-dimensional construct, accounting for personal values, expectations, beliefs and attitudes towards work.

Chalofsky & Krishna (2009) describe meaningfulness as deriving a deep level of satisfaction from the accomplishment of a task and a deeper level of motivation in performing a task. From this description of meaningfulness, many contact centre agents may struggle to derive meaning from BPO work. The extant literature views the contact centre environment as a stressful work environments (Harry & Coetzee, 2011; Jacobs & Roodt, 2011).

Within the MOW framework, young people are considered active producers of their own work socialisation through their behaviour and work personality, including their own MOW perceptions (Harpaz et al., 2002). Anurhada et al. (2014) assert that the fixed personality characteristics of an individual do not determine the meaning of work. They argue that the MOW is constructed through the interaction of the social structures and the personal preferences of individuals. Anuradha, et al.’s view aligns with the systems and structuration theoretical frameworks utilised in this study, in that the authors see the MOW as being shaped by the organisational, cultural, political, and economic environment that surrounds it, as well as by the

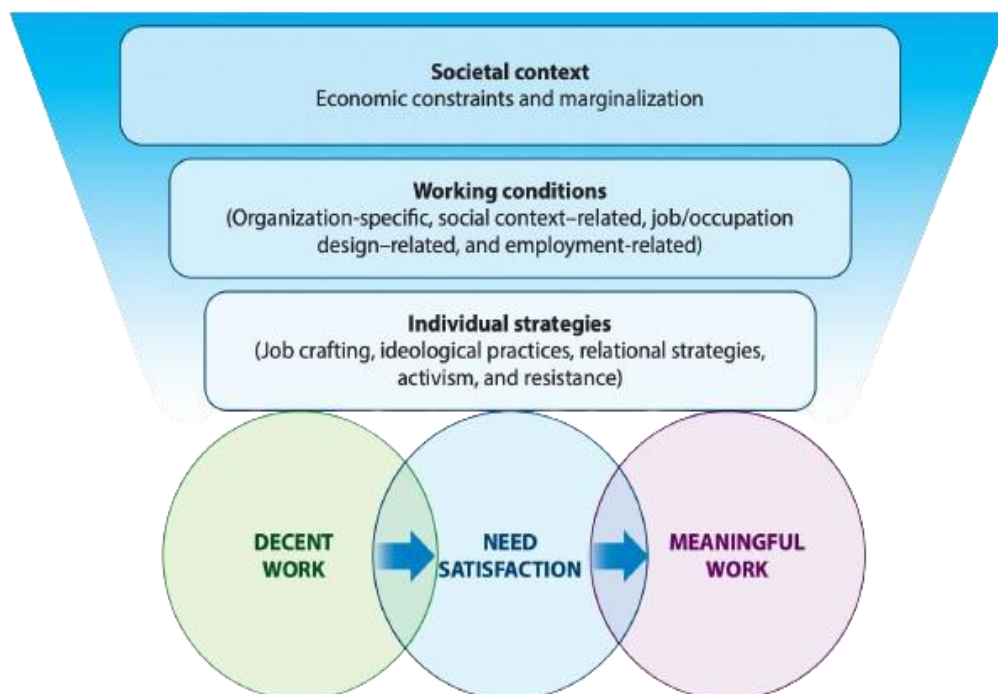
unique experiences, values, and beliefs of the marginalised youth who interpret it. The following section applies Blustein et al.'s (2023) concept of psychological working theory to the meaning that marginalised youth attach to work experiences.

#### 4.3.1 Psychological Working Theory (PWT) and Marginalised Youth

Blustein et al. (2023) proposed an integrated model of decent and meaningful work using the psychology of working theory (PWT). PWT draws from vocational psychology, multicultural psychology, intersectionality, and the sociology of work (Duffy, 2016).

**Figure 3**

*Integrative Conceptual Framework for Connecting Decent Work and Meaningful Work*



*Note.* This framework illustrates the relationships between societal context, working conditions, and individual strategies in fostering meaningful work through decent work and need

satisfaction. From "Understanding decent work and meaningful work," by D. L. Blustein, E. I. Lysova, & R. D. Duffy, 2023, *Annual Review of Organizational Psychology and Organizational Behavior*, 10, 289–314, p. 292. <https://doi.org/10.1146/annurev-orgpsych-031921-024847>. CC BY 4.0.

According to Duffy et al. (2016), the central aim of PWT is to explain the work experiences of those near or in poverty, people who face discrimination and marginalisation in their lives, and individuals who are going through challenging work-based transitions. The precepts of PWT align with the aims and objectives of this study, which is to understand the experiences of marginalised youth during their transition into the workforce and to identify issues that impede or facilitate their transition. PWT aligns with Bronfenbrenner's (1979) systems model, where contextual factors are critical to understanding youth work experiences (Duffy et al., 2016). PWT combines individual, organisation-level, community-based, and macro-level factors that impact employees' lives (Blustein et al., 2023). By identifying and exploring contextual factors, PWT assists in expanding our understanding of the complex interplay between marginalised individuals, their communities, and the society that shapes their work lives. PWT is congruent with the mission of occupational social workers who serve marginalised populations and are committed to intervening at the people-work interface. The next section delves into how socio-structural forces impinge on employment experiences.

#### **4.3.1.1 Psychological Working Theory and the Societal Context**

Blustein et al. (2023) posit that the socio-structural forces in society determine the availability of decent and meaningful employment for individuals, including the conditions of



the prevailing economy, the laws, history, and employment opportunities within that society. These conditions are the fundamental elements that create the framework for decent and meaningful work experiences. Scarpetta et al. (2010) concur that various factors contribute to youth marginalisation, such as social, political, and economic influences, incomplete higher education, and insufficient financial resources to continue education.

Rather than having only a working knowledge of the societal influences on decent work, occupational social workers need to take a more active stand in placing themselves at the interface of societal issues and marginalised youth experiences. Examining the theoretical implications through academic rhetoric plays a part in highlighting the challenges, but it needs to address issues at the interface. Converting theoretical and research understanding into practical interventions can set occupational social workers apart and give the profession operational leverage. By doing so, occupational social workers can demonstrate their value and increase their impact, leading to greater recognition and influence within youth employment. Decent work for marginalised youth can be addressed through a collaborative ecosystem approach involving stakeholders and professionals such as policymakers, employers, and labour unions, as well as those professionals with a social development agenda.

#### **4.3.1.2 Work Conditions**

The second level in Blustein et al.'s (2023) framework explains that decent and meaningful work conditions are created when employers consider employees' needs. Working conditions refer to the environment, circumstances, and factors affecting labour in the workplace, including job hours, physical aspects, legal rights, organisational culture, workload, and training

(Ali et al., 2013). Job conditions and job quality in the context of this study are considered to be synonymous. Both job conditions and job quality form the core work experience. Anwar and Graham (2019) view job quality as autonomy at work, which includes achieving work-life balance, health and safety at work and having a voice in the workplace. For young employees to experience empowerment and have a voice, employers need to intentionally create safe engagement platforms.

According to Swart (2006), call centre work is characterised by many factors, including sensory overload, frequent technological advancements, constant changes in products and services, high work pressure, and heavy workloads. Furthermore, Anwar and Graham (2019) add that call centre work requires high levels of sustained interpersonal interaction with customers, leading to high exhaustion levels and employee withdrawal. Contact centres lack decent and meaningful work conditions in terms of job quality (Anwar & Graham, 2019) and job conditions (Ali et al., 2013). Human resource personnel are tasked with examining job conditions and job quality and building the workforce and capabilities of the organisation (Thite et al., 2014). Two examples of youth employment benchmarks adopted in the UK and Australia are expanded on in the next section and illustrate the direction that the BPO sector could take to make work more equitable for all.

#### ***4.3.1.2.1 Examples of Good Youth Employment Standards***

An innovative organisation called Youth Employment UK provides support, advice, resources, and insight from youth employment experts on good youth employment practices and other labour-related issues (Good Youth Employment Standards, n.d.). Youth Employment UK created ten principles for ‘Good Youth Employment’ and encourages employers to join and

adopt them as part of their labour practices. They then receive a Good Youth Employment Badge. Social Ventures Australia (SVA) is based on similar principles to Youth Employment UK, which is focused on influencing youth employment outcomes. However, unlike Youth Employment UK, which works mainly with employer partners, SVA focuses on influencing broader systems such as schools, communities, and organisations by advocating for systems change (SVA, 2016). Social Ventures Australia highlights ten principles of youth employment which employers in Australia are encouraged to incorporate into their work systems (SVA, 2016). Youth Employment UK's and Social Ventures Australia's (SVA) premises of Good Employment benchmarks align with the ILO's strategic objectives of decent work. A combination of both these support services and organisation benchmarks is needed in the South African BPO sector.

Adopting similar youth-friendly standards customised for an at-risk population group could raise the standard of BPO work conditions. Human resource professionals are important role players in the workplace. Occupational social work and human resource professionals' objectives are closely aligned (Meijerink and Keegan, 2019; Cheeran et al., 2015). The following section expands on the valuable contribution that the human resource function plays in influencing the youth work experience.

#### ***4.3.1.2.2 Human Resources and Marginalised Youth***

Armstrong (2006) defines human resource management as a strategic and coherent approach to managing an organisation's most valuable assets, the people working there. These individuals, individually and collectively, contribute to achieving the organisation's goals and objectives (Thite et al., 2014). Human resource activities aim to maintain and manage the

employment relationship between the employer and employees. Meijerink and Keegan (2019) explain that human resource activities encompass all the processes, policies, and practices related to managing people in an organisation. According to Armstrong (2006), human resources is not just a mere function within an organisation but a valuable tool and asset that the organisation can leverage to gain a competitive advantage.

Presbitero et al. (2023) conducted a 20-year human resources literature review which focused on information technology and BPO sectors in Asia. The study included a meta-analysis of 47 empirical studies. Presbitero et al. (2019) argued that there is a need to review the effectiveness of human resource interventions and practices in the Business Process Outsourcing (BPO) industry. Despite implementing various human resource-related interventions, the turnover rate in the BPO sector remains high. The authors suggest a comprehensive review of these interventions is essential to identify the reasons behind their ineffectiveness and develop new strategies to reduce employee turnover in the BPO industry. The high turnover rate is a significant concern for BPO companies as it affects productivity and increases costs associated with recruiting and training new employees.

The employment of marginalised youth necessitates a more holistic approach and interventions which can address basic needs, such as transport and meals. Nassar-McMillan et al. (2017) concur that programmes helping low-income and ethnic minority youth should cater to addressing their individual experiences of marginalisation. Betcherman et al. (2007) concur that previously disadvantaged or marginalised youth have special transition needs that require further research attention.

While addressing basic needs such as transportation and meals may differ from the traditional human resource function, the socio-structural conditions from which employees come should dictate which needs human resource activities are focused on. According to Paulsen and Berg (2016), social support during the transition from school to work is vital for young adults in shaping their future. The authors highlight practical, emotional, affirmational guidance, and participation support as essential forms of support during this period. According to Schlossberg (1981), the Four S theory of transition includes 1) situation, 2) self, 3) support, and 4) strategies.

Occupational social workers and human resource professionals are suitably positioned to address the work situation of marginalised youth, provide individual and group support, and work on strategic policy directives that can support basic needs. Anwar and Graham (2019) report that contact centres are desirable due to advantages, such as income, transportation, employment benefits, and recreational amenities. Bakker and Demerouti (2008) suggest that social support may enhance work engagement by fuelling motivational processes. A total rewards package for youth should consider their social support needs and benefits.

Occupational social workers operating at a macro-level within workplaces are specifically trained to understand the socio-structural barriers that impinge on youth employees. Cheeran et al. (2015) contend that social work in an organisational context is primarily concerned with enhancing employee welfare, particularly in supporting the efforts of the human resources department to meet employee needs. Macro-social workers play a crucial role in turning personal challenges into societal concerns and translating this awareness into tangible policies and initiatives (Mills, 1963; Reisch, 2013).

Impact sourcing is a hiring intervention that has turned private trouble into a public/organisational issue. According to Bulloch and Long (2012), impact sourcing refers to recruiting and employing individuals who reside at the bottom of the socio-economic pyramid and have limited opportunities for sustainable employment. The following section explores impact sourcing further and the advantage this gives marginalised youth in securing employment.

#### **4.3.1.2.3      *Hiring and Marginalised Youth***

According to Bulloch and Long (2012), impact sourcing provides higher-income employment and access to new income opportunities to individuals that might not otherwise be employed in this sector. The primary aim is to create sustainable employment opportunities for underprivileged communities and empower youth through skill development and training while providing businesses with cost-effective, high-quality services. Impact sourcing is a socially innovative workplace practice that benefits marginalised youth. These types of socially innovative activities are needed in the youth-to-work transition. Mulgan (2006) highlights a significant innovation deficit in supporting young adults to achieve stability in their careers, relationships and lifestyles. This deficit calls for new approaches and solutions for youth to seamlessly transition to work.

According to Carmel et al. (2016, p.397), “Globally, impact sourcing may employ as many as 561,000 people and generate as much as \$20 billion worldwide by 2015.” Impact sourcing, as a form of innovative hiring, gives employers a competitive advantage by accessing a

captive audience of motivated youth. However, sourcing marginalised individuals and giving them entry into the workplace is incomplete if not followed up by bespoke impact transition services, such as innovative onboarding, training, and mentoring. Hiring youth from disadvantaged backgrounds is only half the issue resolved; providing support to ensure they succeed and adapting work policies and practices to reflect this, is what is needed. The following section examines career management and training as a transition support for marginalised youth.

#### **4.3.1.2.4      *Career Planning***

Career planning is a deliberate process to assist employees in becoming aware of the opportunities, constraints, choices and consequences involved in career-related goal (Mehta, 2020). Young employees who are more likely not to have mentors in their networks will need more in-depth assistance from employers in career planning. Thite et al. (2014) state that human resources plays a crucial role in offering learning and growth opportunities to employees, facilitating their career development, and providing access to mentoring and coaching.

According to social exchange theory, organizations can build positive employee relationships by providing valuable resources like training opportunities, recognition, and incentives (Cropanzano & Mitchell, 2005).

According to Savickas (2005), career construction theory highlights the importance of a contextualist perspective in understanding careers, where careers are viewed in relation to the social environment rather than by internal development or career trajectory. Career construction theory (Savickas, 2005) is a framework that training providers can use in BPOs to understand the contextual issues that may impede learning and development in the contact centre. Career construction is helpful as it acknowledges the impact of limited educational opportunities,

discrimination, and broader socio-structural forces on the career development of marginalised employees. McMahon et al. (2008) concur that there is a need to move away from the traditional middle-class Eurocentric perspective on career development. Instead, they suggest specific career development processes that focus on marginalised groups.

Social cognitive career (SCC) theory can also be a valuable tool for human resource practitioners in BPOs (Savickas, 2005). According to Lent (2020), social cognitive career theory is an intricate exploration of the interplay between individuals and their career environments. It examines factors such as cognition, interpersonal relationships, and external influences. Social cognitive career theory is widely researched and can provide valuable insights for human resource practitioners into the behaviours and decisions of individuals in both educational and occupational settings (Lent et al., 1994).

A comprehensive empirical report by Social Ventures Australia (SVA) identified ten principles of youth employment (SVA, 2016). These principles, which employers must incorporate into their work systems, include identity, building aspirations, literacy and numeracy capability, employability skills, careers management, business partnerships, early intervention, personalised support, alternative employment pathways, and financial support. Applying all ten of these principles in the BPO sector could aid in the career management of marginalised youth. The scope of this report does not allow for an exploration of all ten principles; however, career management, early intervention, and business partnerships are particularly valuable and relevant to marginalised youth employment.



Kuijpers (2019) emphasises the need for collaboration between schools and organisations to be a shared responsibility. The author argues that there needs to be more career dialogue with students regarding career opportunities. This lack of dialogue presents a missed opportunity for contact centres to develop early interventions at the school level and share the opportunities available in contact centres for career growth and skill development. By collaborating with schools, BPOs could spark increased interest in the field among students. Occupational social workers can act as career coaches or transition facilitators uniquely positioned to design school interventions and arrange career days that bridge the gap between school and work. School-to-work transition programmes need not begin only at the workplace but can be fostered through collaborative relationships with education partners.

Watts (2001) highlights the twofold role of career guidance for excluded youth. Firstly, it can be preventive, helping young people avoid exclusion. Secondly, it can be reintegrative, supporting those currently excluded to gain access to education/training and the labour market. Therefore, collaboration between schools and BPOs can significantly improve the career prospects of marginalised youth. It can help prevent exclusion by providing students with information about career opportunities, and it can also support those who are currently excluded by providing them with access to training and employment opportunities. The following section delves into the role of training for marginalised youth.

#### **4.3.1.2.5      *Training for Marginalised Youth***

According to Chiaburu and Tekleab (2005), workplace training is a planned intervention to enhance an employee's job performance, including knowledge, skills, attitudes, motivation,

and behaviour - the aim being to improve productivity, achieve organisational goals, and boost job satisfaction and career growth. Training and development intervention have been linked to employee retention and lower employee turnover (Malik & Nilakant, 2011; Presbitero et al., 2016; Queiri & Dwaikat, 2016; Thite & Russel, 2010). Findings outlined by Doellgast et al. (2020) point to training investments associated with lower reported stress and burnout; and higher job satisfaction in contact centres. Workplace training closes a critical gap caused by the disparate educational system in South Africa. While the total transition process of youth is critical, training and development are vital components in a successful youth-to-work transition (Herr, 1999). The human resource team is crucial in recruiting and training entry-level employees, ensuring they possess the necessary skills and knowledge to perform their tasks effectively.

There is a need for human resource practitioners and trainers to develop training programmes and career supports that are tailored to the unique context of their employees. By acknowledging the impact of broader contextual factors on career development, BPOs can take steps to promote more equitable access to training and career opportunities and facilitate the professional growth of marginalised individuals. Human resource professionals can take meaningful steps to increase equity and inclusion within their influence and ensure that the workplaces they represent have fair working practices that lend themselves to decent work. These changes can be reflected in incremental human resource policy development, including how training content is designed. Likewise, onboarding for marginalised youth could be customised to include often taken-for-granted work socialisation issues. The following section

explores the value of onboarding and how incremental changes to this often-overlooked workplace process can influence the work experience of marginalised youth.

#### **4.3.1.2.6      *Onboarding and Marginalised Youth***

Onboarding and socialisation to work for new hires is crucially important. Onboarding is the process of learning, networking, resource allocating, goal setting and strategising that ends with new hires quickly reaching maximum productivity (Bauer & Erdogan, 2011). According to Saks and Gruman (2018), relatively little attention has been given to newcomers' work engagement in the socialisation literature. Klein et al. (2015) reiterate that a successful onboarding process helps ease new employees' apprehensions during the transition by helping them make sense of the new work environment. Stein and Christiansen (2010) emphasise that onboarding should include the full set of experiences to which the new hire is likely to be exposed to in the first year.

In examining the needs of young employees, Stewart et al. (2017) point out that onboarding and early development programmes are essential early in the workplace experience as they equip employees with the necessary tools to navigate the complex and ambiguous nature of the modern-day workplace. Mitchell and Gamlem (2017) state that well-structured onboarding has more impact on retention and engagement than tuition reimbursement and vacation benefits. Based on a review of five studies with 1,556 participants, Frögéli et al. (2023) found that on-the-job training was an effective onboarding strategy that could be highly effective in helping new professionals adapt to their roles and responsibilities.

#### **4.3.2 Role of Individual Strategies in Adapting to Work**

In the individual strategy, Blustein et al. (2023) refer to job crafting as a strategy which involves employees proactively making minor modifications or tweaks to their work to find more meaning, satisfaction, and engagement in their roles. Wrzesniewski and Dutton (2001, p.179) define “task crafting as altering the number, scope, or type of job tasks; relational crafting as altering the quality and amount of interaction with others in one’s job; and cognitive crafting as altering how one views one’s job”. While individual strategies may be suitable for experienced employees with the leverage of experience and tenure, job crafting is not a practical solution for young, inexperienced, marginalised employees. Contact centre agents operating in a highly structured and performance-driven environment (Benner, 2007) do not have the luxury of changing their work tasks. Marginalised youth have limited work autonomy (Graham et al., 2019b) and decision-making.

Another important individual strategy espoused by Blustein et al. (2023) is workplace relationships with peers and supervisors. Youth can exercise their ability to build social capital and important and meaningful relationships that can influence their work experience. Much has been written about the social capital deficit youth experience due to their lack of access to networks and connections in the workplace (De Lannoy et al., 2018; Haider, 2016; Mowat, 2015). However, once youth enter the workplace, they have the opportunity to build meaningful relationships that can influence their growth, learning and development experiences. Youth can learn how to build social capital with their peers, mentors and supervisors. According to Helve and Bynner (2007), young people are the recipients of capital and the creators of social capital.

The following section explores social capital and dissects the role of essential workplace relationships for marginalised youth.

#### **4.3.2.1 Social Capital and Marginalised Youth**

According to Requena (2003), social capital has five dimensions: 1) trust, 2) social relations, 3) commitment, 4) communication and 5) influence. According to Requena's findings from an empirical study investigating the quality of work life, "social capital is a better predictor of quality of life at work and job satisfaction than the characteristics of the worker, the organisation, or the work environment" (2003, p.331). This important finding is particularly relevant and important for marginalised youth who may not have the advantage of education or experience, but can leverage social capital to foster decent and meaningful work experiences once in work.

Requena (2003) argues that social capital trumps individual and organisational characteristics as a predictor of quality work and job satisfaction. The concept of social capital offers a valuable lens through which to examine the experiences of marginalised youth transitioning to work. Further research is needed to explore the five dimensions of social capital (Requena, 2003), the relationship between the five dimensions and the transition to work for marginalised youth, and the implications of this relationship for training and occupational social work practice. Savickas (2005) and Blustein (2016) concur that relationships are considered an integral part of both work and personal life and are responsible for shaping the work environment and the overall quality of work life. The relationship between young employees and their supervisors is vital in creating social capital and influences the quality of work experience.

#### **4.3.3.2 Role of Supervisors**

Supervisors play a critical role in mentoring, ensuring that organisational goals and targets are met, and assisting youth in negotiating interface issues. They are responsible for managing and guiding entry-level employees, shaping their work experiences and influencing their perceptions of work. Supervisors have the power to create a positive work environment by providing support and recognition, or they can contribute to a hostile work environment by being unsupportive and unsympathetic to employee needs.

Lerner et al. (2015) proposed that youth thrive when in psychologically and socially safe spaces that contain the following three characteristics:

1) positive and sustained relations with a caring, competent, and reliably committed adult, such as a mentor, coach, teacher, or faith leader (Rhodes, 2020); 2) life skills-building experiences; and 3) opportunities to participate in and take a leadership role.

Following Lerner's (2015) conditions for thriving, youth employees who experience care and developmental commitment from their supervisors are likely to feel a sense of security, belongingness, and mattering at work. Ensuring a psychologically and socially safe space is essential for marginalised youth who struggle with the feeling of belonging and value (Mowat, 2015). According to Hechanova (2013), when supervisors provide support, employees feel less stressed about balancing work and personal life and are less likely to want to resign from their jobs. Pattnaik and Panda (2020) concur that supervisor support is linked to, and can influence, employees' intention to remain employed in call centres.

In addition, supervisors have a unique position as ambassadors of institutional knowledge and representatives of the organisation's power. This knowledge includes the ability to uplift, and their position of power includes granting rewards and instituting workplace discipline. The reality for marginalised youth is that their lack of workplace experience and low self-esteem could amplify power differentials with supervisors (Sukarieh & Tannock, 2011). Working with an at-risk population is challenging, and supervisors working with marginalised youth could benefit from training in specialised communication, coaching, and people management skills to match the demands of a youth workforce. Given the crucial role that supervisors play, addressing the chronic shortage of suitable supervisors is important not only for the industry but also for youth transitioning to employment who require more individual mentoring and coaching (Whitehead et al., 2023).

According to Naim and Lenka (2018), mentoring shapes employees' development and fulfils social and self-actualisation needs, fostering employee growth, development, community, and self-discovery. Boxall and Purcell (2003) state that an organisation's performance depends on the line managers' ability, motivation, and opportunity to do their job. Supervisors play an important mentoring role for young employees. Youth thrive in positive and sustained relations with a caring, competent, and reliably committed adult, such as a mentor, coach, teacher, or faith leader (Rhodes, 2020). Respectful relationships are a solid foundation for teaching, training, and learning (Wlodkowski & Ginsberg, 2017).

Annink and den Dulk (2012) point out that supportive, mentoring supervisors can empower marginalised employees through respect, training, and inclusion in decisions.

Supervisors play an important mentorship role. Entry-level employees highly value mentorship. De Lannoy et al. (2015) reviewed 12 qualitative studies to identify the needs of young people in South Africa. The review revealed that the youth face multiple and interconnected challenges. The young people in De Lannoy et al.'s (2015) study expressed a desire for spaces where they could receive encouragement and opportunities to engage and become active citizens. From a positive youth development perspective, BPO organisations are in a prime position to create the spaces that youth need, which will serve both organisations' and the youth's needs.

This chapter has delved into the tenets of decent and meaningful work, focusing on what good youth standards for the BPO sector mean. It has also covered specific workplace practices, including the role of human resource professionals and supervisors. Given the objective of this research to contribute to an occupational social work practice model, the chapter would not be complete without expounding on the critical and specific role that occupational social workers can play with marginalised youth.

#### **4.4 The Role of Occupational Social Workers with Marginalised Youth**

##### **Transitioning to Employment**

According to Straussner (1990, p.2), occupational social work is a “specialised field of social work practice which addresses the human and social needs of the work community through a variety of interventions which aim to foster optimal adaptation between individuals and their environments.” The South African Department of Social Development (2020) has adopted the Straussner definition, which focuses on fostering optimal adaptation between individuals and their environments.



As outlined in the regulation pertaining to the registration of occupational social work as a specialisation by the Department of Social Development (2020), occupational social work services are essential in promoting an inclusive and just work environment. These services encompass a wide range of work-focused assessments, work interventions, community interventions, and policy and programme development to improve the well-being of employees, their families, and the larger community. The South African occupational social work definition and the services outlined by the Department of Social Development (2020) have a distinct macro-work focus. The following section expounds on the key features of the Act and relates this to a model of practice for occupational social work.

#### **4.4.1            Application of the Occupational Social Work Tenets as Pertains to Marginalised Youth (Department of Social Development, 2020)**

The central tenets of the occupational social work regulation can be divided into five segments:

- 1) Work-focused assessment and interventions on individuals, groups, employing organisations and community levels.
- 2) Employing organisation and community interventions to ensure socially responsible organisations.
- 3) Work-family interventions to promote family wellness in relation to the impact of employment.
- 4) The promotion of a culture in the workplace to enhance human rights practice, social justice and productivity.

5) Work-focused policy and programme development.

The act provides a helpful foundation for assessing interface issues and the impact of the employing organisation in the community in which the workplace functions. The following section expands on each of the five tenets.

#### **4.4.1.1 Work-focused Assessment and Interventions**

According to the Department of Social Development (2020), which outlines the regulations of occupational social work as a speciality, the first component of occupational social work service is a work-focused assessment, which involves evaluating client systems and their relationships. Focusing on assessment as the first part of intervention aligns with Iversen's (1998, 2001) model of workplace intervention. According to Iversen (2001), the approach to occupational practice should begin with understanding the attitudes and values of the client regarding work, as well as any discriminatory experiences they may have faced in the workplace.

In addition, the Department of Social Development (2020) highlights the importance of work-focused interventions, which, when applied to marginalised youth, could include various contextually-based support interventions that foster adaptation but are aimed at the needs of employees, groups, employing organisations and the community. A youth-centric approach to intervention is ensured when, as in Bronfenbrenner's (1979) ecological model, youth are at the centre of all systems and interventions. According to Iversen (2001), work-focused interventions are not limited to the workplace but could include career-enrichment programmes between high school and community colleges and private business and government institutions. Partnerships and relationships external to the workplace are critical in shaping internal work systems. Iversen

(2001) argues that fostering collaborative relationships among community members, businesses, and local organisations can boost individual human capital and expand the pool of qualified candidates for employers.

Social Ventures Australia (2016, p.30) states, “Effective cross-sector partnerships with business can build a young person’s employability skills, meet employers’ recruitment and retention needs and create better employment outcomes for disadvantaged job seekers.” The range of service offerings would depend on the specific needs identified during the assessment phase, and occupational social workers would design bespoke collaborative interventions that meet the needs of the employer and the employing organisation.

#### **4.4.1.2 Socially Responsible Employing Organisations**

According to the Department of Social Development (2020), the second component includes employing organisations and community interventions to ensure socially responsible employing organisations. According to this statement, working directly with employers to create an environment where businesses prioritise ethically sound business practices and decent and meaningful work for youth, should be prioritised by occupational social workers. The practice of impact sourcing is an example of a socially responsible practice from an employing organisation. Impact sourcing involves hiring youth from surrounding communities with challenging socio-economic backgrounds and exposing them to opportunities for sustainable employment (Bulloch & Long, 2012). Occupational social work practices such as impact sourcing based on inclusivity and empowerment can correct social imbalances facing marginalised communities.

#### **4.4.1.3 Work-family Interventions**

The third component, work-family interventions, according to the Department of Social Development (2020) recognises the importance of balancing work and family responsibilities. In the context of marginalised youth, an assessment of home circumstances is needed to determine the impact of family issues on work. For example, interventions that take into consideration social issues such as elderly parents, single parents, child-headed households and the issue of black tax on young people. In a report on investing in entry-level talent, Gilsdorf and Hanleybrown (2017) reported on four proven practices that have demonstrated both efficacy and business returns: 1) on-site resource navigators; 2) compensation above industry average; 3) employer-sponsored childcare; and 4) subsidised transportation.

Re-thinking the role of occupational social workers as on-site navigators that can direct youth to community resources and bridge the socio-structural gap that young employees experience could serve to resolve both employer and employee challenges. According to Gilsdorf and Hanleybrown (2017), on-site navigators assist in resolving employee issues related to childcare, transportation, housing, and company benefits, which has been recognised as an effective way of providing confidential consultations to employees. The authors argue that navigators are equipped with knowledge about medical, legal, and financial issues and resources, allowing them to quickly resolve issues by leveraging their expertise in corporate, community, and public services. Occupational social workers need not be equipped with medical, legal and financial knowledge, but should provide access to these resources and monitor and evaluate service delivery. Innovative resource navigator companies such as ‘The Source’ and ‘Ask the Navigator’ based in the USA are examples of organisations that act as a unifying resource to

bring together people, systems and supports from across communities and businesses (Ask The Navigator, n.d; The Source, n.d.).

#### **4.4.1.4 Promotion of a Culture of Social Justice**

The fourth component, espoused by the Department of Social Development (2020) highlights promoting social justice, human rights, and productivity culture. The Act aligns with Iversen's (2001) view that occupational social workers can play an important advocacy role. According to Iversen (2001), occupational social workers could play a vital advocacy role by collaborating with businesses to improve organisational systems and resource management for unemployed, dislocated, and marginalised youth workers.

The occupational social work regulations (Department of Social Development, 2020) align with Mor Barak's (2000) concept, which advocates for a move away from a focus on practice settings to instead a focus on the practice mission. According to Mor Barak (2000, p. 205), a practice mission focuses on interface issues, which are about “positioning occupational social work at the focal point between the realities of the workplace and the needs of the workforce.” The practice mission with youth is to practice intervention focused on the individual within the context of the environment.

In addition, Iversen (2001) argues that occupational social work intervention involves gathering data on workplace issues. The author argues that information on childcare, transportation issues, work-family conflicts, and low wages that disadvantage workers is needed to support promoting these services in the workplace. Iversen argues that organisational data can influence organisational and government policies and give occupational social workers leverage

in advocating for organisational change. Occupational social workers must adopt a data-driven approach to effectively cater to employees' needs and assist employers in making informed decisions. A data-driven approach to policy and programme development will give occupational social workers more credibility in the workplace and make their services more relevant to the needs of the work community. In the next section, work-focused policy and programme development will be explored.

#### **4.4.1.5 Work-focused Policy and Programme Development**

Finally, work-focused policy and programme development is essential in promoting long-term change. According to Sheedy (2013), social work is inherently connected to political processes, as it deals with individuals in their environment, which is primarily shaped by the decisions and policies of influential social, governmental, and economic institutions. Work-focused policy and programme development may include advocating for policy changes to reduce youth unemployment and developing and implementing new programmes and initiatives to support marginalised youth in the workplace.

By working to create systemic change, occupational social workers can help build a more just and inclusive society for all. The Department of Social Development (2020) occupational social work tenets align with Iversen's (2001) call for occupational social workers to take a more social activist role. According to Iversen's (2001) work programme, social activists can use testifying, lobbying and coalition-building skills with governmental task forces on job creation to build employment opportunities for work programme participants, as well as to reclassify employment-focused social service jobs as needing the knowledge and skills of occupational practitioners.

The roles and positions presented above move occupational social work out of the micro-work shadow and instead focus on the multi-level role that can be played. The Department of Social Development (2020) regulations provide a solid foundation for developing an occupational social work model of practice for marginalised youth.

This section has argued in favour of diverse practice settings and multiple client populations. Fogey and Cai (2023) reject this notion arguing that unresolved philosophical questions in occupational social work relate to how, where and with what populations of occupations social workers should practise. According to the authors, this practice confusion negatively impacts the ability of the field of occupational social work to grow and evolve as a field of practice. Fogey and Cai (2023) make a valid point that philosophical tension in the field has contributed to differing occupational social practice settings and interventions. The tensions, discussions and debates within the profession are important for continued growth and professional agility to match person-in-environment needs. Rather than Fogey and Cai (2023) pointing to occupational social work tensions as contributing to a lack of growth in the sector, the robust tension and debate should be seen as a precipitating growth factor. What is missing, however, is active occupational social work dialogue and scientific contribution at a research level.

#### **4.5 Conclusion**

This chapter focused on exploring the principles of meaningful work, with reference to the ILO (1999) and the literature on the meaning of work (MOW). The chapter highlighted the

significance of ensuring fairness, security, and respect, and promoting the rights of workers, active social discourse, and social protection for marginalised youths. Additionally, Blustein et al. (2023) examined the psychological working theory to understand the impact of the social context and individual strategies that marginalised youths could employ. Lastly, the chapter delved into occupational social workers' roles and applied the Department of Social Development (2020) tenets to marginalised youth. This application provided a firm practice foundation for developing a working knowledge of what an occupational social work model should constitute. A review of the literature has underscored the study's importance in exploring the dynamics at the youth-organisation interface and developing a potential model of practice for occupational social workers in South African workplaces. Moving to chapter five, I will outline the research methodology used to gather data on the felt experiences of youth and the viewpoints of BPO professionals.



## **CHAPTER FIVE**

### **Research Design and Methodology**

#### **5.1 Introduction**

The chapter addresses the methodological principles applied to the study, beginning with a discussion of the rationale for the research approach and an overview of the methodological paradigm underpinning the study. Particular attention is paid to how the research approach relates to youth transitioning to work. Justifications for the methodological decisions and their relevance to the study's objectives are analysed. Additionally, the research procedures and ethical considerations that underpin the study are examined.

The core research objective is to explore the complex dynamics at the intersection between youth and organisations. It aims to capture youth's lived and felt experiences as they face obstacles and opportunities when entering the workplace. By examining the coalface of these interactions, potential solutions and insights to strengthen the youth-organisation interface are explored.

#### **5.2 Research Questions**

Alvesson and Sandberg (2013, p.11) state, “Research questions are the starting point and path for all forms of knowledge development.” The starting point for this research study is based on the following research questions:

1. What are the *transition experiences of marginalised youth* in the organisations they are employed in?
2. What are the *views of human resource professionals and supervisors/managers* that work with marginalised youth transitioning to work?
3. What are the *views of BPO industry leaders* about the dynamics that exist *at the youth organisation interface*? *What social innovative methods* do they see as contributing to the youth-to-work transition?
4. What are the factors that need to be considered in a model of practice for occupational social workers in addressing youth unemployment at the youth-organisation interface?

The research questions led to the choices made for the research paradigm and theoretical framework that guided the study. The following section discusses research paradigms and why an interpretivist paradigm suited the study.

### **5.2.1 Interpretivist Paradigm and Youth-to-Work Transition**

According to Rehman and Alharthi (2016, p.51), “A paradigm is a basic belief system and theoretical framework with assumptions about 1) ontology, 2) epistemology, 3) methodology and 4) methods”. Denzin and Lincoln (2000) define paradigms as human constructions that deal with first principles, indicating where the construction of meaning is embedded in the research data. Mackenzie and Knipe (2006) refer to the term ‘paradigm’ to describe a researcher’s ‘worldview’. Research paradigms are a way of understanding the reality of the world and form the foundation upon which research efforts are understood and produced.

This study adopts an interpretivist paradigm. Through this paradigmatic view, youth experiences can be fully recognised, and the meanings of their experiences can be better understood (Fossey et al., 2002; Pizam & Mansfeld, 2009). The interpretivist paradigm tries to ‘get into the head of the subjects being studied’ and understand and interpret what the subject thinks of or the meaning of a context in which a subject finds themselves (Kivunja & Kuyini, 2017).

Interpretivism is different from positivism as it aims to include richness in the insights gathered, rather than attempting to provide definite and universal laws that can be generalised and applicable to everyone regardless of critical variables and factors (Bhattacharjee, 2012; Myers, 2008; Pizam & Mansfield, 2009; Saunders et al., 2012).

**Table 2***Differences between Interpretivism and Positivism*

| <b>Assumptions</b>                     | <b>Positivism</b>                                             | <b>Interpretivism</b>                                                                       | <b>Youth to Work Transition</b>                                                |
|----------------------------------------|---------------------------------------------------------------|---------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------|--------------------------------------------------------------------------------|
| Nature of Reality                      | Objective, tangible, single                                   | Socially constructed, multiple, relativist                                                  | Youth and employer experiences were explored-qualitative research design.      |
| Goal of Research                       | Explanation                                                   | Understanding                                                                               | Understand dynamics at the youth-work interface.                               |
| Focus of interest                      | General and representative                                    | Specific and unique                                                                         | Understand the specific marginalised youth experience in SA.                   |
| Knowledge generated                    | Laws and absolute (value-free)                                | Meanings and relative (value bound)                                                         | Context-specific knowledge of youth in SA BPOs.                                |
| Subject/<br>Researcher<br>Relationship | Rigid separation                                              | Interactive, cooperative, participative                                                     | Research position and tool: semi-structured conversational interviews.         |
| Desired information:                   | How many people think/do a specific thing/particular problem? | What do some people do, what kind of problems do they confront, how do they deal with them? | How do marginalised youth cope with transition issues when working in SA BPOs? |

*Note.* Table 2 outlines the differences between positivism and interpretivism, adapted to the context of youth transitioning to work in South Africa. Adapted from Research Design (2012) by J. Creswell; Consumer Behavior in Travel and Tourism (2009) by A. Pizam and Y. Mansfeld; and Introducing Qualitative Research in Psychology (2008) by C. Willig.

Interpretivism's juxtaposition with positivism in Table 2 demonstrates the valuable contribution of an interpretivist paradigm and its usefulness in this study. The table highlights that through an interpretivist lens, the nature of reality is seen from multiple angles. The view of youth and many role players in the employing organisation is considered.

The following section expands on interpretivism's appropriateness by examining the study's epistemological and ontological stance and how this relates to youth experience and issues of the interface in the workplace.

### **5.2.2 Epistemological and Ontological Basis of the Study**

When thinking epistemologically, researchers attempt to answer questions about the nature of knowledge and how knowledge is produced (Creswell, 2012; Willig, 2008). Neuman (2000) posits that knowledge is based not only on observable phenomena, but also on subjective beliefs, values, reasons, and understandings of how people make meaning in their lives. A subjectivist epistemological viewpoint is relevant in the study as it considers the individual perspectives and unique contexts that youth navigate as they transition to employment (Moon & Blackman, 2014).

When thinking ontologically, researchers should answer questions such as: What is there to know or the nature of reality? Willig (2008) and Vagle (2018) suggest that epistemology focuses on what it is to know, and ontology focuses on what it is to be. Interpretivism and this research study, which centres around youth transition, adopts a relativist ontological position, as it recognises the subjective nature of reality, which allows a spotlight on better understanding individuals' lived experiences and perspectives.

Inductive reasoning complements subjectivism by allowing for the analysis of specific youth transition experiences and data points. Neuman (2000) views inductive reasoning as beginning with a detailed observation of the world and moving towards more abstract generalisations and ideas. Inductive reasoning allows for a better understanding of marginalised youth's general experiences.

There are differences in socio-economic contexts, cultural orientations and experiences of youth and employers; therefore, an interpretivist approach which captures both youth and employers' perspectives is relevant to the study (Pham, 2018). Understanding the social context of marginalised youth and how this relates from the perspective of the work environments in which youth are employed will assist employers and occupational social workers in devising interventions and policy formulations that meet the needs of youth.

Hammersley (2013) emphasises that since multiple interpretations are formed through human relationships, interpretivist researchers are well-positioned to understand the diverse ways

of seeing and experiencing the world through different contexts and cultures. The following section highlights the literature that guided the analysis of the youth data.

### **5.3 Literature that Guided the Analysis of the Youth Data**

According to Tracy (2019), questions help a researcher navigate unfamiliar research contexts and provide an orientation and a launch pad for action. The research questions assisted in navigating both youth and organisation literature and helped ground the context and focus of the study. The youth theories and sub-theories presented in this study provide a structured approach to address the research questions and offer important perspectives on the challenges faced by marginalised youth during their transition in the workplace and the problems encountered at the interface.

#### **5.3.1 Marginalised Youth-to-Work Transition and the Supporting Theories**

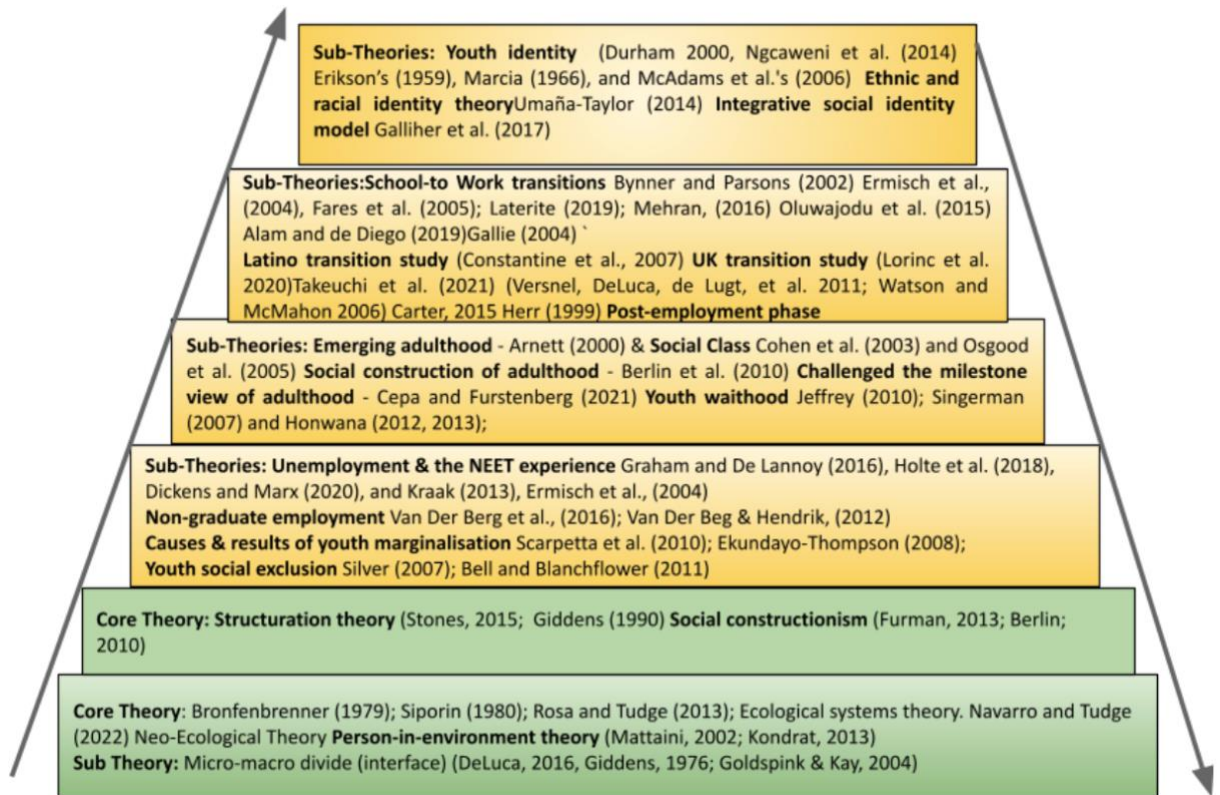
What are the transition experiences of marginalised youth in the organisations in which they are employed? By utilising systems theory and the ecological model as the base theories, the main research question and aim of the research study centred around the transition experience of marginalised youth (Bronfenbrenner, 1979; Siporin, 1980; Rosa & Tudge, 2013; Navarro & Tudge, 2022). Systems theory and Bronfenbrenner's ecological models move beyond just individual experiences. Still, they are also helpful in capturing and understanding the systemic factors at the interface, such as the impact of organisational culture, social biases and lack of support resources. Structuration theory (Giddens, 1990; Stones, 2015) and social constructionism (Berlin, 2010; Furman, 2013) aided in addressing the research question as these theories provided a valuable lens to analyse the interplay between youth and the core relationships in the youth sub-system.

Figure 4 is an integrated summary of the youth theories; the core theories are at the base of the pyramid base and represent the foundation upon which the research approach and theoretical foundation were built. The sub-theories cover the spectrum of the NEET experience, ranging from unemployment literature to emerging adulthood to school-to-work transition. Lastly, on the top of the pyramid are the theories relating to social identity literature.



**Figure 4**

*Integrated Summary of Youth Theories*



### 5.3.2 Literature that Guided the Analysis of the Organisation Data

The value of this study is that it combines two paradigmatic views of transition, one view from the youth perspective and a view from the employing organisation. The primary objective of the research was to better understand the complex interface issues that NEET youth face as they transition to work. The youth theories demonstrate the interrelated factors that complicate youth transition to work. To balance the person-in-environment discussion, the literature on

organisations that were explored allowed for a broad understanding of the interface issues in the work environment.

Some of the core theories that brought balance to the understanding of youth experiences include the conceptualisation of decent work. Blustein et al. (2023) integrated a model of decent and meaningful work using the psychology of working theory (PWT), which added a further layer of understanding to the work environment. Theoretical understanding of the role of human resources, hiring and career planning also provided valuable insights into organisational structures that impact youth transition.

The theories and sub-theories in the organisational literature were analysed to understand the complex workplace systems and how the relationships within and between them contribute to interface issues that employees and employers encounter in their daily work.

#### **5.4 Research Design: Qualitative Interpretivist**

A qualitative interpretivist design was suited as this research design addressed research questions from both the youth and organisations' perspectives. In the first part of the study, an interpretive phenomenological research design was utilised for the youth research. The highly personal nature of youth's subjective experience and meanings of transition made an interpretive inquiry suitable.

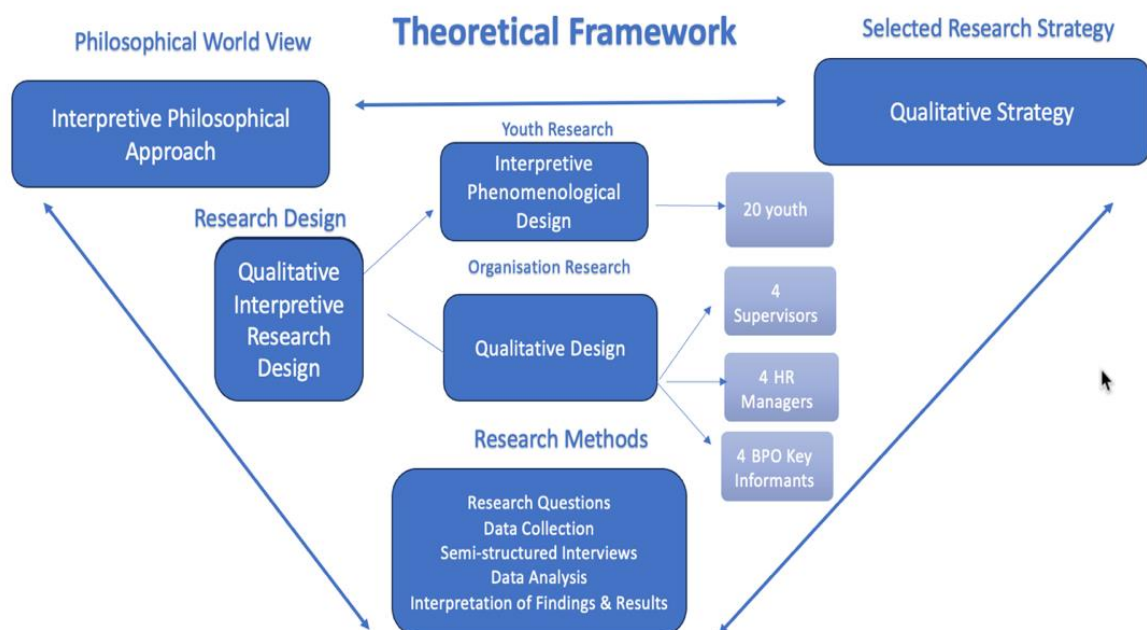
The second part of the study, the organisation component, employed a qualitative research design. A qualitative interpretivist design aligns with the broad objectives of the study, which was to examine issues of the interface, in this case, the personal (private) experience of youth unemployment; and the socio-structural and organisational (public) perspective of youth

un/employment. The design choice allowed for exploring multiple facets of organisation and youth issues, adding depth and breadth to the research study.

Figure 5 outlines the research framework underpinning the study. It shows how the interpretive approach adopted in the study links to the qualitative research strategy, both of which address the critical questions about youth transition to employment.

**Figure 5**

*Overview of the Research Framework*



*Note.* This figure gives a snapshot of the research methodology employed in the study. It represents an overview of the research approach and strategy; it includes both the youth and organisation research design and the research methods and shows the research populations and

sample size. The arrows show how each of the processes interact and flow from each other, demonstrating the separate but integrated research methodology.

A qualitative interpretivist research design focuses on meaning-making and is designed to foster context-specific understanding (Leedy & Ormrod, 2010; Schwartz-Shea & Yanow, 2012).

A qualitative design aligns with the ecological systems theoretical framework adopted in the study as it explores the relationships between people and encapsulates the larger systems that youth are a part of. In the context of this study, a deep understanding of the impact and contribution that the systems in the workplace play on youth transition is important to understand. It was, therefore, fitting to implement a qualitative research design that captured the workplace context.

Newberry (2012) asserts that interpretive inquiry is consistent with social work, since it includes concepts of agency, closeness to subjects, and a critical inter-subjectivity that connects private troubles to public issues. An interpretive inquiry was applicable in this study as issues of choice and agency that youth face were explored. Careful consideration of how the research paradigm, theoretical framework, and research design fit together assisted in producing quality research procedures that addressed the research questions and study aims.

The following section explains each part of the research design. Part one focuses on the employee or youth population group, where an interpretive phenomenological research design was applied. Attention is given to the phenomenological philosophical disposition that grounded the youth component of the study. Part two demonstrates why a qualitative research design suits

the employer or organisational research. The dual methodological framework is designed to capture multi-perspectives from both recently employed youth and employers in the employing organisations.

#### **5.4.1           Part One: Interpretive Phenomenological Research Design (Youth Population)**

An interpretive phenomenological research design answered the following youth research questions:

What are the transition experiences of marginalised youth in the organisations in which they are employed?

Vagle (2018, p. xii) aptly states that phenomenology and, by extension, phenomenological data analysis means “trying to be profoundly present, leaving no stone unturned; to slow down to open up; to dwell with our surroundings amid the harried pace we may keep; to remain open; to know that nothing is going on and that we can never grasp all that is going on; and to know that our living is always a never-ending work in progress (towards what is, of course debatable)”.

Teherani et al. (2015) suggest that phenomenology in research aims to capture the essence of a phenomenon by examining it through the perspectives of those who have lived it. Connelly (2010) asserts that phenomenology is relevant in the social sciences as it considers the whole person and values a person’s experiences. The whole-person approach in social work research is important when designing workplace interventions. Interpreting individuals' meaning-making activities is central to phenomenological inquiry (Smith et al., 2009). Cresswell (1998)

concur that phenomenology as a study describes the meaning that experiences of a phenomenon or concept have for various individuals. Phenomenology is relevant as a form of qualitative research for this study as it focuses on an individual's lived experiences within the world (Neubauer et al., 2019).

The two main phenomenological philosophical dispositions found in the phenomenological literature are: firstly, the foundational work of Edmund Husserl, which has become known as transcendental or descriptive phenomenology. The second philosophical founder was Martin Heidegger, who developed hermeneutic or interpretive phenomenology (Peoples, 2020). According to Demeterio (2001, p.1), “the word hermeneutics is derived from the Greek word (ερμηνευειν) hermeneuein, meaning to interpret, and its derivative (ερμηνεια) hermeneia meaning interpretation”. The hermeneutic or interpretive approach was congruent with the youth transition research since the study concerns itself with interpreting and deriving meaning from the youth's lived experiences. Neubauer (2019) points out that it is essential to understand the ontological and epistemological assumptions underpinning transcendental and hermeneutic philosophy in order to conduct robust phenomenological research.

The ontological position of Heidegger is summed up by Smith (2016, p.18): “We and our activities are always in the world, our being is being-in-the-world, so we do not study our activities by bracketing the world, rather we interpret our activities, and the meaning things have for us by looking to our contextual relations to the world.” Smith's (2016) view informed the data analysis approach utilised in the youth component of the study. This phenomenological interpretation and contextual relation of youth transition to work is expounded in chapter six, which presents the youth findings and discussion chapter.

Heidegger refers to the being-in-the-world as the Dasein (Peoples, 2020). Heidegger (1927, p.62) coined the term Dasein “to describe how our, being-in-the-world” is always in relation to other people (also termed relatedness or being-with), situated and perspectival. The contextual relations of marginalised youth and their ‘being’, or Dasein, in workplaces mark the ontological position of the research study (Zuckerman, 2015).

Neubauer (2019) concurs that since a phenomenon manifests ontologically in particular situations and contexts, understanding a phenomenon is an ongoing act of interpretation. According to Pascal (2010), the Heideggerian phenomenological approach is essentially humanistic, locating the individual in the context of their life worlds. Ahmad et al. (2019) state that the hermeneutic circle is the iterative process of interpretation, reflective writing, and reading, in order to provide the details of the phenomenon discussed. Newberry (2012) advocates for the congruence between a hermeneutic or interpretive approach, and social work research, due to the idea of the hermeneutic circle as a link between individual experiences and larger structures.

The Heideggerian approach aligns with the tenets of occupational social work, which is interested in the person-as-employee in their life world. An interpretive phenomenological approach is beneficial from an occupational social work point of view as it aligns with Kruger and Van Breda’s (2001) thinking that occupational social workers must understand workplace dynamics and the systems that impinge on the individual employee. The occupational social worker is positioned as the researcher-practitioner to embrace the hermeneutic circle as a tool for

interpretation, reflective writing, and reading and ultimately to implement customised contextual workplace interventions.

Holroyd (2007) succinctly states that in assuming a hermeneutic stance of openness, there can be no such thing as absolute truths and that what we understand and know today is forever changing. The dynamic and complex nature of dynamic change in the socio-economic and organisational system that youth find themselves in, calls for a hermeneutic stance of openness. An open stance will allow occupational social workers to curate interventions that meet specific client needs. In summary, employing an interpretive philosophical research design for the youth research is in line with social work principles and the aims of the youth research. The next section explores the reasons for adopting a qualitative research design for organisational research.

#### **5.4.2 Part Two: Qualitative Research Design (Organisation Population)**

Qualitative research studies are appropriate for assessing complex multi-component interventions and focusing on intervention improvement (Busetto et al., 2020). Punch (2013) posits that a pragmatic rule of thumb for qualitative research is that it includes data in the form of words rather than numbers. The research process involves emerging questions, procedures, and data typically collected in the participants' setting (Creswell, 2009). A qualitative research design answered the following organisation research questions:

1. What are the views of human resource professionals and supervisors/managers in working with unemployed youth?



2. What are the views of BPO industry leaders about the dynamics that exist at the youth-organisation interface, and what social innovative methods do they see as contributing to the youth-to-work transition?
3. What factors need to be considered in a model of practice for occupational social workers in addressing youth unemployment at the youth-organisation interface?

**Table 3**

*Characteristics of a Qualitative Design*

| <b>Characteristics of Qualitative Research</b>                 | <b>Alignment with the study</b>                                                                                    |
|----------------------------------------------------------------|--------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------|
| Research occurs in a natural setting.                          | The study took place in South African organisations employing youth.                                               |
| Relies on the researcher as an instrument for data collection. | In this qualitative approach, the researcher actively participated in the research process (Smith & Osborn, 2008). |
| Employs multiple methods of data collection.                   | There are four separate data collection points in the study i.e. youth, supervisors, HR and BPO experts.           |
| Inductive reasoning.                                           | The reasoning process in this study moved from the research process to general principles.                         |
| Based on participants' meaning.                                | The experiences and meanings of each research participant guided the research study.                               |

|                                                       |                                                                                                |
|-------------------------------------------------------|------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------|
| Emergent                                              | Phenomena, ideas, and insights that emerged in the research process guided the study.          |
| A theoretical lens that is interpretive and holistic. | The research aim in the study was to interpret and understand participants' lived experiences. |

*Note.* This table highlights the characteristics of a qualitative research design and demonstrates how they align with the study's objectives. Adapted from Research Design (2012) by J. W. Creswell.

A qualitative research design was appropriate as it considered the context and multiple views from various organisational stakeholders. In the current study, the opinions of supervisors, human resource professionals and BPO experts were collated to understand a broader organisational perspective regarding youth in transition. This multi-perspective view contributed to a rich and varying data set, which aided in the credibility of the findings. The multiple data sources, or triangulation, facilitated a more comprehensive understanding of the phenomena under study (Patton, 1999).

Occupational social work is concerned with the human and social needs of the work community (Department of Social Development, 2020); a qualitative approach was therefore necessary to better understand employers' views. Employees and employers exist in a diverse system; employers' decisions, biases and potential stereotypes could contribute to how youth experience the workplace. A qualitative approach was suitable for organisational research as it

allowed a better understanding of organisational practices and employee expectations. The following section examines the research methods and an overview of the research process that was employed.

## **5.5 Research Methodology**

Research methodology is about the research process and how to systematically solve the research problem and questions (Guba & Lincoln, 2005; Patel & Patel, 2019). This section outlines the research process and how the research questions were answered. It begins with an overview of the research process, the setting of the study, the population and the sampling procedure utilised, the choice of research instruments, and lastly, the process employed in data collection and analysis.

### **5.5.1 Overview of the Research Process**

Developing a well-thought-out research strategy contributes to the quality of results and the trustworthiness of the overall study (Nowell et al., 2017). This research strategy followed three stages:

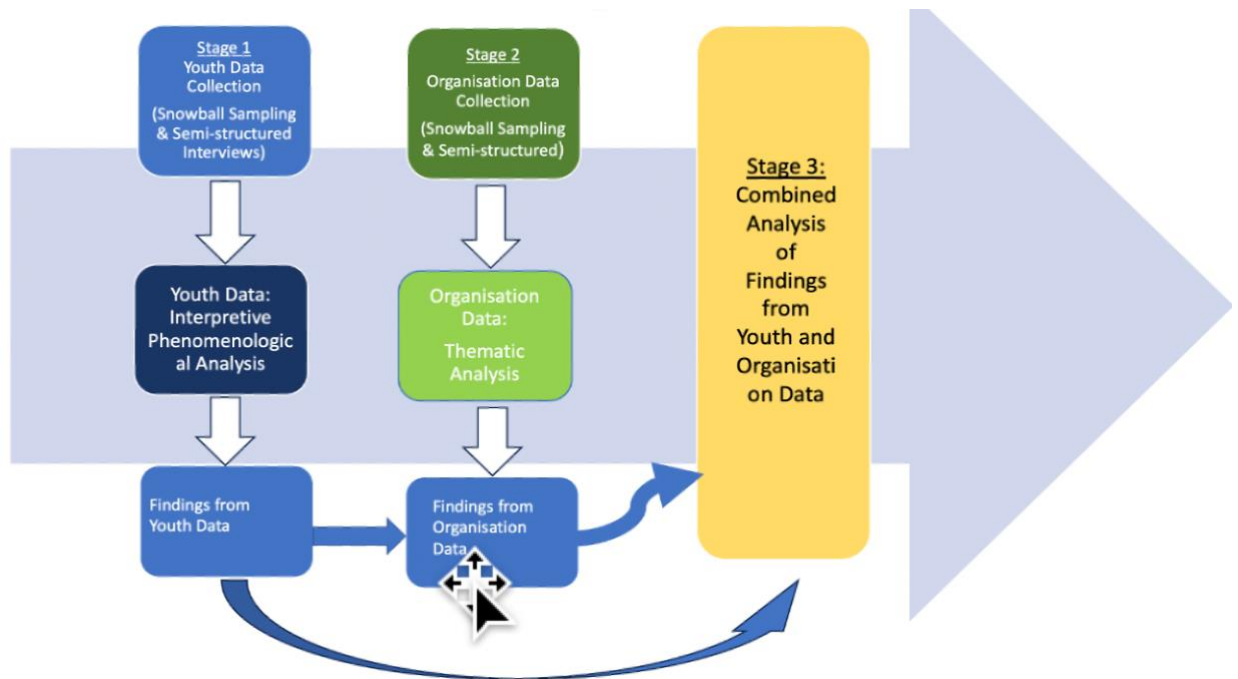
**Stage one** was analysing the youth data for this section; interpretive phenomenological techniques were utilised. The Dedoose computer analysis programme assisted with separate data analysis. The specific data analysis process utilised is outlined in section 5.5.5 below.

**Stage two** involved a thematic analysis of the organisation's data, which included interviews with human resource managers, supervisors, and BPO experts. At this stage, data was analysed separately using thematic analysis and Dedoose computer analysis.

**Stage three** consisted of an integrated analysis of data from stage one (youth data) and stage two (organisation data).

**Figure 6**

*Stages of the Research Process*



*Note.* This figure demonstrates how the youth data collection and analysis shown in Stage 1 and the organisation data and analysis shown in Stage 2 were combined in Stage 3, resulting in the main findings and development of the occupational social work model in chapter eight.

## **5.5.2 The Setting of the Study**

According to Schwartz-Shea and Yanow (2012), good interpretive research designs occur through the crafting of situations - the selection of research-relevant settings, actors, events and documents that can lead to “thick experience,” as well as ways to “thicken” encounters in the field. The setting for the study was organisations in the business process outsourcing sector (BPO). Budhwar et al. (2009), posit that the BPO industry’s core offering is leveraging technology or specialist process vendors to provide and manage an organisation’s business processes and applications. The next section expands on the growth of the BPO sector and the potential opportunities this presents for marginalised youth making this an important focus area for transition research (Diga et al., 2013).

### **5.5.2.1 The South African Business Process Outsourcing (BPO) Sector**

South Africa was the most favoured offshore customer experience delivery location in 2022, according to the annual Ryan Strategic Advisory Front Office BPO Omnibus Survey (Williams & Pritchard, 2022). The overall South African BPO market is valued at \$461 million, \$272 million of which is attributed to traditional BPO (Rajagopaul et al., 2020).

The BPO sector has made a significant contribution to the economy of South Africa, with the sector creating 20,121 jobs between January to December 2022, contributing \$323 million to the country’s export revenue (BPESA & Hamunene, 2023). The Global Business Sector quarterly report from BPESA reported that KwaZulu-Natal, the Western Cape and Gauteng all registered significant growth. The report further stated that there were 3460 new jobs created in KwaZulu-Natal, accounting for 57,11% of new hires. The Western Cape registered 1976 (32,62%) new positions for the quarter. Gauteng registered 615 (10,15%) new jobs. There were

also 7 (0,12%) new jobs reported in the Eastern Cape (BPESA, 2023). From the report, it can be seen that Kwa-Zulu Natal experienced the highest job growth rate accounting for more than half of all new jobs created in the quarter. For this reason, the setting for the study was the Kwa-Zulu Natal BPO sector.

### **5.5.3 Population and Sample Size**

According to Charmaz (2006), the aims of a study drive the project design and is a significant determinant of the population sample size. In line with this principle a multi-perspective population group that captures youth and employers' perspective is encapsulated in this study. The first population group comprised South African youth based in four BPOs who had experienced unemployment and had recently transitioned to employment. The second population group in the research was human resource personnel, supervisors/managers in South African workplaces, and BPO industry experts.

#### **5.5.3.1 Sampling Strategy**

Non-probability purposive sampling was deemed appropriate to sample participants as it allowed for strategic sampling relevant to the research questions (Bryman, 2012). Polit and Beck (2017) assert that qualitative researchers need to have a flexible approach to the collection and analysis of data, as it is difficult to determine and define the flow of research activities. The initial plan for sampling needed to be altered from target and convenient sampling to snowball sampling. Target sampling yielded low sample size results for the research, because accessing a larger population proved challenging. Thite and Russell (2010) concur that historically gaining access to BPO workforces has proven difficult, meaning employee voices have been limited in

survey research on BPOs. The target size and distribution of the sample population are highlighted in Table 4 below.

**Table 4**

*Population and Sample Size*

| <b>Population</b>                                         | <b>Sample Size</b> |
|-----------------------------------------------------------|--------------------|
| Youth                                                     | 20 participants    |
| Human Resource Personnel (4) and Supervisors/Managers (4) | 8 participants     |
| BPO Industry Experts                                      | 4 participants     |

Snowball sampling relies on referrals from initially sampled respondents to other persons believed to have the characteristic of interest (Johnson, 2014); in this study, referrals from youth and managers in the BPO industry were relied on. The referral process proved to be a time-consuming exercise and delayed timelines for the data-capturing process. Naderifar et al. (2013) rightly point to snowball sampling as a gradual process where time influences the selection of samples. The next section expands on the eligibility criteria employed for each population group.

#### ***5.5.3.1.1 Eligibility Criteria for the Youth Population***

Phenomenological research aims to select participants who are willing to talk about their lived experiences and who are diverse enough from one another to enhance the possibility of rich

and unique stories of the particular experience (Laverty, 2003; Van Manen, 2014). For the youth research, the following eligibility criteria were set:

1. South African youth between the ages of 18 and 34 years were selected as this aligns with the South African definition of youth (Statistics South Africa, 2020).
2. Participating youth should have experienced unemployment before their current employment status.
3. Participating youth were employed as contact centre agents in a South African BPO during the interview.

#### ***5.5.3.1.2 Eligibility Criteria for Human Resource Personnel and Managers/Supervisors***

Human resource personnel and supervisors were accessed by requesting formal permission from each individual. The inclusion criteria for human resource personnel and managers/supervisors were that they had experience working with marginalised and unemployed youth for at least two years.

#### ***5.5.3.1.3 Eligibility Criteria for Key Informants: BPO Industry Experts***

BPO industry experts with sector knowledge and experience were interviewed to understand their views of youth employment. The criteria for inclusion was a minimum of five years of involvement in the BPO sector, with experience working with previously disadvantaged and unemployed youth populations.



### 5.5.3.2 Sampling Procedure

As a starting point to connect with youth and employers in the BPO sector, a senior individual employed at a national BPO organisation was approached to assist in gaining access to BPO managers in the sector. The organising body has representation in four provinces, and the individual was based in the Kwa-Zulu Natal office. Reaching out to a well-connected individual in the BPO industry was done to obtain a list of interested BPOs to participate in the study. A research information sheet was sent to the contact person via email explaining the purpose and procedure of the research. Figure 7 shows the steps that were taken in the sampling process.

**Figure 7**

*Steps to the Final Sampling Process*



The inclusion criteria and specifics of the study were also explained telephonically. The contact person at the organising body emailed a list of Human Resource Managers from his database to share information about the study and to elicit interest. The efforts from the organising body yielded limited results. The snowball sampling strategy was implemented following the initial strategy, which reached only eight youths and three senior employers. This sampling involved contacting employers known to individuals from the initial sample and reaching out to BPO professionals in my network. Formal invitation letters were sent to suitable individuals, and the snowball sampling procedures proved successful.

#### **5.5.4 Research Instruments**

The research instruments consisted of four semi-structured interview guides. One interview guide was developed for each study population: 1) the youth population, 2) human resource professionals, 3) supervisors/managers, and 4) the key informants in the BPO sector. Appendices A - K contain details of the participant information sheets, consent forms and interview schedules. The semi-structured interview guides align with the qualitative research design as they allow for flexibility in questioning and add rich depth to the study.

Research prompts were included in the youth interview guide, which focused on recruitment, employment and the experience of workplace relationships. The guides for the human resource professionals and supervisors/managers included research prompts that covered the recruitment phase, experiences working with recently employed youth, organisational perspectives, relationships in the workplace and views on occupational social workers.

The development of multi-perspective research instruments aided in the triangulation of results. According to Vogl et al. (2019), multiple perspective interviews (MPIs) involve interviewing various members of a population group separately and triangulating their accounts during analysis to gain insights into the functioning and experiences of individuals within the group. The interview schedules were developed with the study's aims and objectives as the core and aligned with the research questions and literature review, which guided the study.

#### **5.5.4.1 Pretest of Research Tool**

The interview schedules were pre-tested with participants from each population group. The pretest results were not included in the analysis of the final results. A snowball sampling approach was utilised to gain access to pre-test participants. A formal email and research invitation sheet were shared with three BPO managers in my professional network. The email explained the research objectives and criteria for selecting participants. Once the BPO manager had approved that participants in the contact centre could participate, a formal invitation letter was sent to pre-test participants. Where more information was required, a briefing call was arranged with the manager to explain the research and clarify the inclusion criteria. In the final pre-test, two youth participants, one supervisor, human resource personnel, and a key BPO informant were interviewed.

Accessing pre-test participants proved challenging and time-consuming, with several participants not arriving for the interview. The COVID-19 pandemic was a precipitating factor in the poor response rate, with several contact centre agents shutting down due to the spread of the virus. To ensure the safety of pre-test participants during the pandemic, interviews took place

virtually via Zoom. The data gathered from the pre-test was not used as part of the study, but instead served to refine the interview questions in the schedules.

Once participants completed the pre-test, minor changes were made by the researcher to words and specific phrases in the interview schedule to ensure clarity and ease of understanding. The focus of the research remained the same, with edits facilitating a coherent flow of questioning. The following section explains the data collection and analysis procedures. The first part deals with phenomenological data collection and analysis, and the second part focuses on qualitative data collection and analysis.

#### **5.5.5 Data Collection and Analysis**

A qualitative interpretive research design guided the data collection process. Scientific and social science research principles were adhered to, with one of the main factors for determining the research method being the initial research questions (Englander, 2012). Seidel (1998) and Suter (2012) note that qualitative data collection and analysis is best understood as a symphony based on three elegant but simple notes—noticing, collecting, and thinking. According to Seidel, when one notices, one records information and codes it, using an organising framework; collecting data includes shifting and sorting information, and when one thinks about the data, one finds patterns, makes sense of them, and makes discoveries.

Suter (2012) describes interpretive research designs as iterative and recursive since there is a lack of control over the setting, individuals and organisational processes. Schwartz-Shea and Yanow (2012) note that hermeneutic reasoning that undergirds interpretive research processes is built on successive phases of learning. According to Vagle (2018), the main idea behind the

hermeneutic circle is that interpretation is an ongoing activity made in context. According to Holroyd (2007), interpretation or understanding from a hermeneutic perspective begins with the fore-projections of the researcher, which are a product of the researcher's situatedness in the world. This means the researchers' backgrounds, experiences, and worldviews shape how data is interpreted and understood.

While Seidel's (1998) work provides the overarching analytical approach, the specific implementation required a more structured phenomenological procedure. The next section demonstrates the phenomenological analysis procedure adapted from Peoples (2020).

#### **5.5.5.1 Phenomenological Youth Data Collection and Analysis**

Youth data collection occurred between 2021 and 2022, when the COVID-19 pandemic was rife. Virtual interviews were provided as an option for all participants to ensure that participants felt relaxed and safe during the interviews. Face-to-face interviews were conducted only when South African health authorities considered it safe. The COVID-19 pandemic delayed the planned data collection process. As a result of the pandemic, an adapted virtual and in-person approach to data collection was needed. The data collection sessions followed a semi-structured interview format; Appendix C outlines the interview schedule utilised in the youth interviews.

##### ***5.5.5.1.1 Phenomenological Interviews and Data Analysis***

Data were collected employing phenomenological interviews. Van Manen (2014) suggests that phenomenological interviews occur in environments where participants can do their best thinking and in informal settings where participants are safe and relaxed. According to Giorgi (2009), phenomenological interviews have one main criterion: a complete description of

the experience lived through by participants. To emphasise the lived experience, relevant youth quotes are highlighted and underlined in the youth findings and discussion in chapter six.

Phenomenological interviews conducted for the youth stage of the research were a specific type of semi-structured in-depth interview that was grounded in the lived experiences of youth and making sense of the youth participants' worlds (Arp, 2004; Høffding et al., 2019; Van Manen, 2014). The youth interviews elicited detailed and personal stories of the youth who shared the common phenomenon and experience of transition to work from a period of unemployment (Moustakas, 1994; Van Manen, 2014).

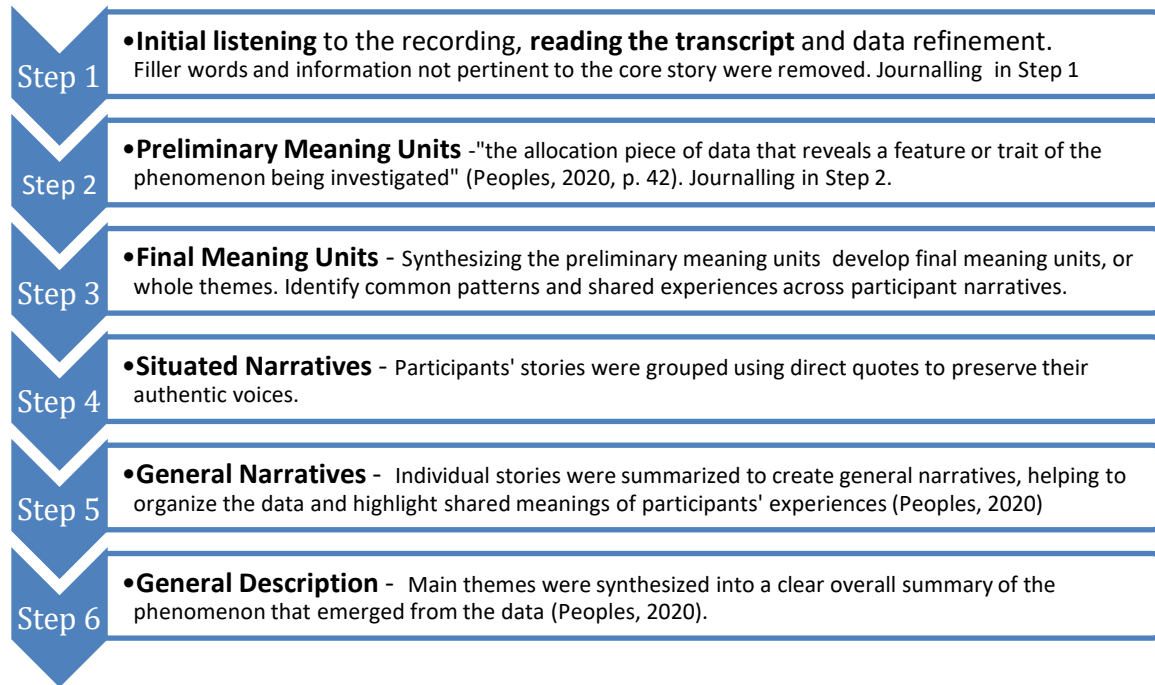
According to González-Soto et al. (2022), phenomenological interviews should demonstrate empathy, careful listening, and patience with participants. These authors argue that these characteristics are achievable in a virtual environment with an experienced researcher. My background in the youth unemployment sector and my social work training made me adept at showing empathy, attentive listening, and demonstrating patience throughout the interview process. In a study comparing video calling and in-person qualitative interviews, Krouwel et al. (2019) found no consistent differences between the nature, character and results obtained from virtual and face-to-face interviews.

To ensure that participants freely contributed ideas and talked about their experiences, participants needed to understand that the research was being conducted for academic purposes and that it was not as part of a company human resource exercise. Participants were assured that their anonymity would be protected through the formal participant information sheets and consent forms issued through a briefing before the interview was conducted (Shenton, 2004).

According to Crist and Tanner (2003), data collection from a phenomenological point of view best occurs with open, semi-structured interviews, which are audio-recorded and transcribed verbatim. An automated transcription service was utilised to transcribe the first draft of the interview transcripts. Bokhove and Downey (2018) argue that automated speech recognition technology (ASR) forms a useful ‘first draft’ for researchers dealing with audio data. Audio recordings were listened to several times, and original interview transcripts were edited and updated with each round. Detailed journal entries (see Appendix M) were made after each youth interview to capture the essence of the youth's felt experience. The difference between the youth and organisation data entailed a more intentional approach. The youth approach elicited felt meanings and phenomena of youth transition experiences, whereas the qualitative data analysis entailed more perspectives and views of organisation participants. Figure 8 details People’s (2020) approach for the youth data analysis.

**Figure 8**

*Phenomenological Data Analysis Flow Chart*



*Note.* Adapted from "How to write a phenomenological dissertation: A step-by-step guide" (p. 28), by K. Peoples, 2021, SAGE Publications.

To fully explain the important process that was followed in the youth data analysis section, Appendix N details how People's (2020) six-step process was applied. Appendix N shows the slow and deliberate analysis process. Following this phenomenological process meant that I needed to constantly remind myself of Vagle's (2018) advice which to slow down to be present. The slow process meant that the youth analysis section took much longer than initially anticipated and also resulted in a large volume of qualitative data as is evident in chapter six.



Once the final transcripts were completed, they were uploaded to Dedoose data analysis software. Dedoose is a cloud-based web application for managing, analysing, and presenting qualitative and mixed-method research data (Socio-cultural research consultants, 2016). The application is accessible through a desktop application. Version 9.2.22 was used for this project. According to Jackson and Bazley (2019), the use of software should be guided by the research questions and the chosen theoretical and philosophical framework. During the research process, particularly in the coding phase, it was crucial that the primary research questions and the hermeneutic phenomenological approach for the youth study directed our efforts.

With the analytical framework established in Dedoose, the next step entailed combining main themes or meaning units into what People (2020) terms situated narratives or codes. As a result, a comprehensive codebook with ten main youth code groups and 14 sub-code groups was developed. Figure 9 is a screenshot from the Dedoose platform which details the codes. Each of these themes or situated narrative is expanded on in chapter six.

**Figure 9**

*Youth Code Book*

|     |                                                   |
|-----|---------------------------------------------------|
| 40  | Hiring Stage                                      |
| 12  | Challenging Hiring Experience                     |
| 28  | Great hiring experience                           |
| 30  | Training Experience                               |
| 26  | Great Training Experience                         |
| 4   | Disconnect between training and work              |
| 90  | Initial experience                                |
| 90  | Adapting to work was hard/new environment         |
| 315 | Current Job Experience                            |
| 55  | Negative Call Centre Experiences                  |
| 260 | Positive Call Centre Experiences                  |
| 73  | Character traits of a successful agent            |
| 42  | Positive Peer Experience                          |
| 21  | Shared Challenges                                 |
| 21  | Belonging                                         |
| 5   | Negative Peer Experiences                         |
| 45  | Family Experiences                                |
| 12  | Support received from family/friends is helpful   |
| 26  | Supporting family financially is a challenge b... |
| 7   | Challenge having a child in your first job        |
| 23  | Socio-Economic Conditions                         |
| 9   | EAP                                               |

This section provided a detailed discussion of the youth data analysis process. The complementary qualitative data analysis process for the organisation data is expanded on in the next section.

#### **5.5.5.2 Qualitative Organisation Data Collection and Analysis**

Organisation data collection took place during the COVID-19 pandemic between 2021 and 2022. To ensure the safety of participants; virtual interviews took place for ten of the 12 interviews. Face-to-face interviews were arranged for two participants towards the end of the pandemic when it was deemed safe to meet in person. It is important to note that the BPO sector

experienced a rise in demand for virtual services during the COVID-19 pandemic as all business transactions took place virtually. The increase in remote work necessitated BPO professionals to revamp workflows and human resource capabilities to adapt to the shift in business operations (Estebal et al., 2024). Therefore, fewer BPO professionals were available to partake in the study, given the focus on new ways of working, which delayed the data collection process.

#### **5.5.5.2.1                      *Qualitative Interviews***

Qualitative interviews were selected as the data collection method for the organisation participants since the views and opinions of a select sample of BPO professionals were sought. According to Silverman (2016), qualitative research plays a significant role in obtaining rich, open-ended data. Merriam and Tisdell (2016) emphasise that qualitative research uses multiple methods to gain a contextual understanding of complex phenomena. In this study, the views of three subsets of individuals were sought, i.e. supervisors, human resource managers and BPO experts. Given the diverse population, a qualitative design and qualitative interviews were appropriate. Semi-structured interview schedules were utilised for each of the population groups being interviewed. According to Magaldi and Berler (2020) semi-structured interviews are exploratory, with a focus on the main topic. Appendix F provides the semi-structured interview schedule for human resource professionals, Appendix I provides the interview schedule for managers and supervisors, and Appendix L outlines the interview schedule for BPO professionals. Table 5 below summarises the core topics covered in each of the interview guides that were utilised.

**Table 5**

*Summary of the Core Topics Organisation Interview Guides*

| <b>Interview Guide for Human Resource Professionals</b>       | <b>Interview Guide for Supervisors</b>           | <b>Interview Guide for BPO Professionals</b> |
|---------------------------------------------------------------|--------------------------------------------------|----------------------------------------------|
| Recruitment/Hiring Process                                    | Recruitment/Hiring Process                       | General BPO Youth Experiences                |
| Induction/Training/Onboarding Process                         | Onboarding/Induction/Transition to Employment    | Human Capital Trends in the BPO Sector       |
| Organisation Policies                                         | Experiences Working with Recently Employed Youth |                                              |
| Workplace Relationships                                       | Organisation Processes and Policies              | Youth Transition to Employment               |
| Occupational Social Work and the Human Resource Professionals | Workplace Relationships                          | Social Innovation and BPO Sector             |
|                                                               | Occupational Social Work and Supervisors         | Occupational Social Work and the BPO Sector  |

The research guide focused on topics relevant to each participant's role in the organisation but also allowed for flexibility and was not constrained to a particular format. The flexibility helped in tailoring questions to the interview context and the participants that were interviewed (Lindlof & Taylor, 2002). The interview guides assisted in guiding the conversations, and while separate prompts were used for each population group, the organisation data for each group was analysed thematically. The ‘data analysis dance’ as described by

Crabtree & Miller (1999) assisted in analysing the organisation's data. In step one of the dance, the content and form were focused on; in this step, the text “led” the dance as the focus was on what the participants in the text were saying. In step two of the dance, the text reflexively focuses on how personal orientation and bias shaped the understanding of the text. My experience working with human resource managers, supervisors, and BPO experts had to be integrated into interpreting the text. According to Crabtree & Miller (1999), this step is when the researcher leads the research dance. In step three of the dance, the text is read interpretively and constructed where the researcher's interpretation of the text's meaning is derived.

This three-step dance process/data analysis process was conducted repeatedly and did not necessarily follow the three-step dance process in sequence but moved between the three steps until a code was decided upon. Once a text was read and re-read, it was assigned a code. Six main organisation codes and 23 sub-codes were identified. Figure 10 depicts the Organisation codes.

**Figure 10**

*Organisation Codes*

|                                                        |                                                       |
|--------------------------------------------------------|-------------------------------------------------------|
| 71 A: Necessary BPO Sector Issues                      | 95 C: Viability of employing marginalised youth       |
| 20 BPO Alignment Required                              | 11 Youth are entitled                                 |
| 29 BPO Sector to improve Employee Value Propos...      | 14 Youth are hungry for opportunity to work & grow    |
| 22 Challenges of the Call Centre Environment           | 8 Psycho-social Issues                                |
| 61 Team Leader Traits                                  | 58 Lack workplace behaviours & skills                 |
| 8 Humility - lead from the back                        | 124 E: WORKPLACE SUPPORT                              |
| 5 Lack of Team Leaders                                 | 18 Practical help from the organisation with meals... |
| 2 Team Leaders share Org. Mission & Goals              | 21 Knowledge of EAP in the workplace                  |
| 30 Empathetic team leaders and employers are re...     | 85 Work readiness programmes as a form of work...     |
| 16 Communication & Relationship Building is key        | 33 F: BPO & SOCIAL INNOVATION                         |
| 50 Appropriateness of the Call Centre Environment ...  | 15 Innovative Recruitment Techniques                  |
| 18 Progression Opportunities in Call Centres           | 2 Innovative Feedback & Coaching                      |
| 12 Contact Centre is not suitable for all unemploy...  | 12 Innovative Digital Upskilling                      |
| 5 Youth get stuck in call centres & then present wi... | 4 Innovative Wellness Initiative                      |
| 15 Rewards & Recognition                               |                                                       |

Each of these codes and sub-codes is discussed in chapter seven. The cornerstone of the research was ensuring that a sound methodological and rigorous process was followed. The next section explains how the core elements of trustworthiness, including credibility, transferability, confirmability and dependability, were maintained throughout the study.

## **5.6 Trustworthiness of the Study**

The classic work of Guba and Lincoln (2005) points to four evaluative criteria to ensure the trustworthiness of qualitative research: 1) credibility, 2) transferability, 3) dependability and 4) confirmability (Babbie & Mouton, 2001; Guba & Lincoln, 2005; Morse, 2015). Merriam and Tisdell (2016) suggest using credibility, transferability, dependability, and confirmability as substitutes for traditional concepts of internal validity, external validity, reliability, and objectivity in qualitative research. Each of these elements is expanded on in the next section.

### **5.6.1 Credibility**

Credibility refers to confidence placed in the truth of the research findings. The strategies mentioned by Guba and Lincoln (2005) were implemented to ensure credibility, including prolonged engagement, persistent observation and triangulation.

My direct work experience in the BPO sector with marginalised youth and employers assisted in meeting the criteria for prolonged engagement and persistent observation. Apart from prolonged engagement and persistent observation over seven years, journaling of the observation experiences helped me gain a better understanding of participants' contexts. The journal entries in Appendix M detail my notes and reflections after each youth employee interview. The journal reflections assisted in developing the code book and are expanded on in the findings section.

Gaining access to organisations and getting permissions, but more importantly, 'buy-in', is important in establishing prolonged engagement and credibility. Complementing engagement, triangulation served as another strategy for ensuring credibility. According to Noble and Heale

(2019), triangulation combines different research theories, methods, or observers to overcome biases that arise from using only one approach. Using multiple perspectives, triangulation strengthens the credibility and depth of research conclusions.

The study's multi-perspective, utilising both an interpretative phenomenological and qualitative approach, ensures triangulation at a methodological level by capturing diverse insights into youth transitions to employment. Specific data analysis and data collection procedures for each method ensure further triangulation. Triangulation will also be achieved through the multiple sources of data, that is, the four groups represented in the study.

Field notes, journal entries and transcripts from each interview during the research process were developed and stored on a password-protected computer. Ongoing debriefing through regular supervision sessions ensured that the integrity of the research process, particularly the data analysis process, could be upheld. In the search for themes, diagrams were utilised to make sense of theme connections and to review themes (Shenton, 2004). These ongoing techniques ensured trustworthiness in the data collection and analysis process.

The services of two independent coders were enlisted, which provided separate coding data that validated the themes and code book that was developed. As Kurasaki (2000) notes, intercoder reliability is a measure of agreement among multiple coders for how they apply codes to text data. It can be used as a proxy for the validity of constructs that emerge from the data. The agreement among the coders ensured that the data analysis process was consistent and reliable and that the findings could be trusted as accurate representations of the research data. Including



intercoder reliability in the methodology is a standard research practice and helps to increase the rigour of the data analysis process.

### **5.6.2 Transferability**

Transferability concerns whether the research findings can be transferred to other contexts. A strategy to achieve this is a thick description of the research contexts (Babbie & Mouton, 2001). A detailed description of the data collection and analysis procedures provides future researchers with a comprehensive understanding of the procedures followed and the research context. The inclusion criteria described in the proposal provides a thick description of the target sample. These measures for transferability allow future researchers to utilise the research findings to inform and support future research efforts.

### **5.6.3 Confirmability**

Confirmability refers to the extent to which the findings from the research process reflect the focus of the research process and the bias of the researcher (Babbie & Mouton, 2001). When conducting an interpretive qualitative study, it is important to consider potential biases, position, and background. Reflecting on how these factors may affect research choices and the investigation's angle is crucial (Malterud, 2001). I utilised several strategies to ensure confirmability in my research, including ongoing supervision, peer discussion, and journaling. These practices allowed me to self-reflect and examine my assumptions and biases critically.

Reflexivity concerns the relationship between the researcher and the social world (Denscombe, 2010). Examining the researcher's relationship with the social world and putting

mechanisms in place to create awareness of these dynamics is an important part of maintaining a high-quality study. Alvesson and Skoldberg (2000) describe positional reflexivity as how the researcher positions himself or herself in the world and articulates his or her commitments to interrogate such positioning. According to Janesick (2015), journaling effectively documents the researcher's experiences, values, biases, and emotions. The reflexivity techniques mentioned were woven into each phase of the research process to ensure that the study was rigorous and high-quality.

A further strategy to ensure confirmability and dependability is an audit trail. According to Denscombe (2010), an audit trail should be mapped out for the reader – allowing them to follow the path and key decisions taken in the research process from the conception of the research through to the findings and conclusions derived from the research. Aside from the reflexive journal, field notes were kept, which detailed decisions taken and research processes that were followed. This included notes on the interviewing strategies and the data collection and analysis processes.

#### **5.6.4 Dependability**

It was crucial to ensure that the data collected in this research study was dependable and stable over time. However, achieving dependability in qualitative studies can be challenging due to the subjective nature of data collection and interpretation (Shenton, 2004). To address this challenge, I followed the recommendation of Tobin and Begley (2004), who suggest that a logical, traceable, and well-documented research process be adhered to ensure dependability. Carcary (2009) describes the audit trail as a collection of documents allowing an independent

auditor to make conclusions about the data. Appendix O outlines the audit trail utilised in the study. The audit trail ensured that the study remained transparent and dependable.

## **5.7 Ethical Considerations**

Ethical clearance was obtained from Wits University's Human Research Ethics Committee (Non-Medical). In addition, I prepared for the data collection process by undertaking an Ethics Training course conducted by the University of Witwatersrand. According to Denscombe (2010), three main ethical principles need to be adhered to when conducting qualitative research: 1) participants' interests should be protected, 2) participation should be voluntary and based on informed consent, 3) researchers should operate in an open and honest manner with respect to the investigation. These core ethical principles were adhered to in the following manner:

### **5.7.1 Protection of participants' interests**

Participants' interests were protected, and intentional measures were taken to ensure that participants did not succumb to physical, psychological, or personal harm. A central ethical principle in the Belmont report (1979), termed 'beneficence' ensures that persons are treated in an ethical manner not only by respecting their decisions and protecting them from harm but also by making efforts to secure their well-being. This principle of beneficence means that the risk of harm to participants must be avoided; however, where potential harm is suspected, especially in vulnerable population groups such as marginalised youth, measures must be taken to ensure their well-being.

The three areas of protection that were ensured for participants in this study included physical protection, psychological protection, and protection of personal information.

#### **5.7.1.1 Physical protection**

The research study took place during the height of the COVID-19 pandemic. It was critically important that participants' physical safety was prioritised. Data collection timelines were delayed as contact centres moved from on-site to completely remote operations. Since gathering at the beginning of the pandemic was considered unsafe, interviews were conducted via Zoom. At the end of the lockdown, contact centres resumed standard onsite operations, and participants were allowed to opt in for an in-person or a Zoom virtual call. The necessary COVID-19 safety precautions and protocols were observed for the participants who chose to have in-person interviews at the contact centre. The researcher and participants wore protective masks and kept a safe distance from each other during the interview.

#### **5.7.1.2 Psychological protection**

Unemployment and the transition to employment is a complex process. Psychological protection for participants entailed acknowledging the possible emotional turmoil that the retelling of their transition story could have. To this end, the services of a trained psychologist specialising in working with marginalised youth was made available to the participants. They were informed that should they require supportive counselling at any point in the research process, an appointment with the psychologist could be made. Training in social work also gave me the advantage of assessing the need for support that participants may have needed during the

interview process. This ensured that all research participants were safe and comfortable throughout the process.

### **5.7.1.3            Protection of personal information**

Participants and organisation identifying details were protected by assigning each participant a code. Paper and digital data will be kept for six years and destroyed thereafter. Should the findings be published, the published data will be kept for two years and destroyed thereafter. All data was kept in a safe and locked with an encrypted passcode. Participants were informed that no financial or other benefit would be received from participation in the study. Copies of the final report will be available to all participants interested in receiving a copy.

#### ***5.7.1.3.1            Informed Consent***

Informed written consent was requested from each participant. The Belmont report (1979) declares that the consent process should contain three elements: 1) information, 2) comprehension, and 3) voluntariness. The most important procedure in this aspect of research is to secure the informed consent form, which formalises a confidentiality agreement between the researcher and the participant.

Informed consent is considered the ‘cornerstone’ of research ethics since it ensures that participants enter research voluntarily with an understanding of what their participation entails (Xu et al., 2020). Within the informed consent process, the principles of anonymity and confidentiality were explained to participants. Bos (2020) points out that confidentiality and anonymity are complementary but different. The authors argue that confidentiality involves an agreement between the researcher and the participant that ensures that personal information is

not disclosed. Bos (2020) points out that anonymity means that participants identities cannot be linked to any part of the research process.

The participant information sheet contained the following information about the research project details, including the title, study focus, the methodology employed, and consent for a digital recording. Considering COVID-19, participants received electronic participant information sheets before the scheduled interview, and the researcher was on standby to answer any questions. Participants were informed that anonymous participation would be ensured and that they had a right to withdraw or skip questions should they choose to do so.

Kruger et al. (2014) point out that measures must be taken to ensure good understanding and freedom of decision-making to participate in a research study without undue influence. Voluntariness and adequate information are especially important for vulnerable youth participants since their socio-economic conditions make them susceptible to risk. In South Africa, consideration of risk, vulnerability, and coercion are important historically, as well as careful examination of how issues of power, privilege, gender, race, and corruption influence the researcher–participant relationship (Benatar, 2002; Knight, 2019).

## **5.8 Conclusion**

This chapter provided an in-depth explanation of the research methodology process and the systematic approach that was used to collect and analyse data. The chapter showed the importance of an interpretive phenomenological research approach for the youth data and why a qualitative research design was chosen for the organisation data. Details of the sampling procedure, research instruments, data collection, and analysis process were expanded. The

chapter concluded with an emphasis on the measures taken to ensure the study's credibility and ethical soundness. Chapters six and seven offer a comprehensive analysis, presentation, and discussion of the research findings, with chapter six concentrating on the findings related to youth and chapter seven focusing on the data collected from employers.

## **CHAPTER SIX**

### **Presentation and Discussion of the Youth Findings**

#### **6.1 Introduction**

This chapter provides a phenomenological and interpretative analysis of the youth research findings. It is divided into two parts: Part one discusses the youth demographic details, which includes an examination of gender, age, educational qualifications, length of time employed, the number of contact centres that youth have been employed in, and lastly, an examination of contact centres that the youth were employed in. Part two explores the youth data's five main themes and subsequent sub-themes.

A phenomenological philosophical approach underpinned the exploration of the youth research findings. This approach focused the study on examining the meanings and experiences of youth and how the environment shaped and influenced youth identity, transition to work, and interface issues in the work environment. According to Vagle (2018), intentionality signifies the relational connectedness of meanings between humans and the world. The reflection throughout this chapter has been intentional. Intentionality is an essential hallmark of phenomenological studies, and this remained a guiding principle throughout the analysis of the youth findings. Fourie and Leibbrandt (2015) point out that researchers approach unemployment studies in a predominantly quantitative manner, which fails to consider the personal experiences of youth unemployment. This research study focuses on youth transition to employment from a phenomenological perspective and contributes to closing the qualitative gap. This chapter



describes the meaning of youth transition experiences to employment in South Africa (Teherani et al., 2015).

Part one, in the subsequent section, examines youth participants' demographic characteristics, including age, type of educational qualification, and employment information. To emphasise the felt experiences of youth, this chapter highlights the core youth excerpts which are bolded and underlined.

## **6.2 Part One: Youth Participant's Demographic Details**

The study comprised 20 youth from four contact centre organisations. Table 6 outlines the main identifying details of the youth participants.

**Table 6**

*Youth Participants' Demographic Details*

| <b>Participant ID<br/>&amp; Pseudonyms</b> | <b>Gender</b> | <b>Age</b> | <b>Length of time<br/>employed</b> | <b>Tertiary<br/>Qualification</b> | <b>Number of<br/>contact centre<br/>jobs to date</b> |
|--------------------------------------------|---------------|------------|------------------------------------|-----------------------------------|------------------------------------------------------|
| 1                                          | Female        | 25         | 36 months and more                 | Partially Completed               | 4                                                    |
| 2                                          | Female        | 24         | 36 months and more                 | Partially Completed               | 2                                                    |
| 3                                          | Female        | 22         | 24- 36 months                      | Yes                               | 3                                                    |
| 4                                          | Female        | 26         | 24 -36 months                      | Partially Completed               | 2                                                    |
| 5                                          | Female        | 26         | 36 months and more                 | No                                | 1                                                    |
| 6                                          | Female        | 22         | 12 - 24 months                     | Yes                               | 1                                                    |

|    |        |    |                    |                     |   |
|----|--------|----|--------------------|---------------------|---|
| 7  | Female | 29 | 36 months and more | Yes                 | 1 |
| 8  | Male   | 26 | 24 -36 months      | Yes                 | 1 |
| 9  | Male   | 22 | 0 -6 months        | No                  | 1 |
| 10 | Female | 26 | 0 -6 months        | Partially Completed | 1 |
| 11 | Male   | 30 | 0 -6 months        | Yes                 | 1 |
| 12 | Female | 22 | 0- 6 months        | No                  | 1 |
| 13 | Female | 20 | 6 - 12 months      | No                  | 1 |
| 14 | Female | 19 | 6 -12 months       | No                  | 1 |
| 15 | Female | 21 | 6 -12 months       | Partially Completed | 1 |
| 16 | Male   | 28 | 24 -36 months      | No                  | 2 |
| 17 | Female | 23 | 36 months and more | Partially Completed | 2 |
| 18 | Female | 28 | 36 months and more | Partially Completed | 2 |
| 19 | Female | 24 | 12 -24 months      | No                  | 1 |
| 20 | Male   | 26 | 36 months and more | Partially Completed | 1 |

The following section discusses the participants' gender, age and educational qualifications. To capture the essence of youth transition experiences, key quotes and passages are written in bold and underlined.

### **6.2.1 Gender Distribution**

The study represented 15 (75%) females and five (25%) males. The research study's gender distribution aligns with the literature, which records female employees accounting for more than 75% of contact centre agents (Batt, 2002; Belt, 2002; Benner & Lewis, 2007). However, Ngabaza (2017) points out that the literature regarding female employees in the contact centre industry is over a decade old, indicating the need for more updated data on female contact centre employees. Interestingly, Ngabaza (2017) argues that contact centres may present as an empowerment opportunity project for young women in the South African context but cautions that there is a danger of contact centres exhibiting qualities as evidenced in the global factories popularly associated with women's exploitation.

No significant difference was noted in terms of females' and males' experiences of adapting and transitioning to work, with 15 females (n=15) and males (n=5) finding the adaptation to work challenging. The dynamics between youth experiences and the organisation's business needs are further explored in chapter seven.

### **6.2.2 Age Range**

Participants ranged in age from 19 years to 30 years old. Fifty-five per cent (n=11) were under 26 years old, and forty-five per cent (n=9) were between the ages of 27 and 30. All participants, irrespective of age, found initially adapting to the work environment challenging. Given that forty-five per cent of participants completed high school at approximately 18 years of age, this means at least nine participants could have had between nine and 12 years of post-school experience. However, for many of these participants, the contact centre role was their first form of formal employment. This aligns with Honwana's (2013) concept of waithood, which is

the period of waiting that some young people experience as they try to enter the job market or establish themselves as independent adults, often characterised by feelings of frustration, uncertainty and hopelessness.

### **6.2.3 Educational Qualifications**

Of the 20 participants, five (25%) reported completing their tertiary qualifications. The five participants who had completed their studies appeared to have resigned themselves to the fact that there were no other opportunities and that they had to take any available job to survive. There appeared to be a sense of hopelessness that pervaded some of the interviews, especially when discussing growth opportunities.

“I have a degree, but **I cannot get a job in my field.**” (P:3)

The large number of ‘unqualified participants’ indicates the need for development opportunities in the contact centre environment. Eight participants (40%) had partially completed their studies, with the majority citing their lack of completion due to financial constraints. Seven participants had no tertiary qualification. Eleven (55%) participants expressed that the contact centre was not a job of choice, and that youth often get stuck in contact centres because they have no qualifications. Excerpts of participants’ education and work aspirations are detailed below.

“I was hoping for a job in finance rather than as an agent.” (P:8)

“I have no qualifications; **my only choice is to settle** for sales as a starter.” (P:11)

“And taking call after call stresses me out. **I had no choice.** I have to keep working.”

(P:12)

The sentiments from the above participants point to the feeling that the opportunity for more meaningful work was limited, and the sense of resignation to ‘settle’ for a role they were over-qualified for, or didn’t really want, pervaded these interviews.

One participant, who was 22 years old, had held three contact centre jobs at three different contact centres since completing high school. She gained a Bachelor of Social Science degree at 22 years of age and shared her frustration in not getting a job in her field of study.

While contact centres offer opportunities to gain experience and develop skills, these are not highly skilled roles, and they appear to be characterised by routine and mundane tasks. In a study exploring the Indian contact centre industry, Thite and Russell (2010) argue that in well-established contact centres, tasks may range from low-value, routine transactional tasks to high-value, analytical and knowledge-intensive tasks. There may be a window of opportunity for well-established employers to offer jobs that may more closely match employee skill sets and aspirations within the call centre environment. The talent promotion and development mechanisms in less established South African contact centres may not be positioned to allow for a match between employee skills and aspirations and employers' needs.

#### 6.2.4 Length of Time Employed

Seven participants had less than one year of work experience, six had worked for one to three years, and seven participants had three or more years of work experience. Irrespective of the time employed, all participants experienced an initial strain in adapting to work; most participants reported feeling confident after completing training and having worked for some time in the role. Even though fifty per cent (n =10) of the participants said that working in contact centres was not their preferred job and they were in the position to 'survive', several of these participants had stayed in their current roles for two years or more.

Participants' retention in their current positions highlights their resilience to endure a challenging work environment. There is a complex interplay between socio-structural conditions and limited educational opportunities, which keep high-potential youth in work environments that are not their first choice. According to Anwar (2019), South African workers tend to get stuck in the same, low-level, and poorly paid jobs with few prospects of promotion or career development. In this study, 14 of the 20 participants (70%) felt 'stuck' and indicated that they were not making progress in the contact centre. The viewpoints below include participants with three or more years of experience in a contact centre.

"I failed at school, I could not carry on, then I came to work here." (P:17)

**"It was not a nice thing to start working** and to work in something that you did not even study for." (P:1)

"It does get better, but every moment you think about it, you literally feel like giving up, but you just have to get up and go back to it again." (P:2)

During the interviews, the mixed sentiment of ‘gratitude’ for the role and ‘resignation’ of the limited growth opportunities available was evident. Two participants shared their experience of being promoted since joining the industry, and two shared that they had an opportunity for self-study within the contact centre.

### **6.2.5 Number of Contact Centre Jobs**

Thirteen participants (65%) indicated that their current role was their first form of employment. Five participants (25%) said this was their second role, and two participants each stated that this was their third and fourth job, respectively.

The contact centre industry traditionally has high attrition and churn rates (Anwar, 2019; Batt, 2002). According to Benner and Lewis (2007), attrition is the number of agents leaving the industry, being dismissed or retiring. Employee churn, or employee turnover, is a metric that describes the percentage of employees who leave an organisation during a certain time frame (Pachghare et al., 2024). Moving from one contact centre to another for better pay and working conditions is standard industry practice (Kgomo & Swarts, 2010; Thite & Russel, 2007). Thirty-five per cent of participants had resigned from their positions as contact centre agents; the following excerpts show some reasons they resigned.

**“I was not happy with the management and the hours, so I resigned.”** (P:17)

**“I think it was a matter of being bored, it is just not working out anymore.”** (P:3)

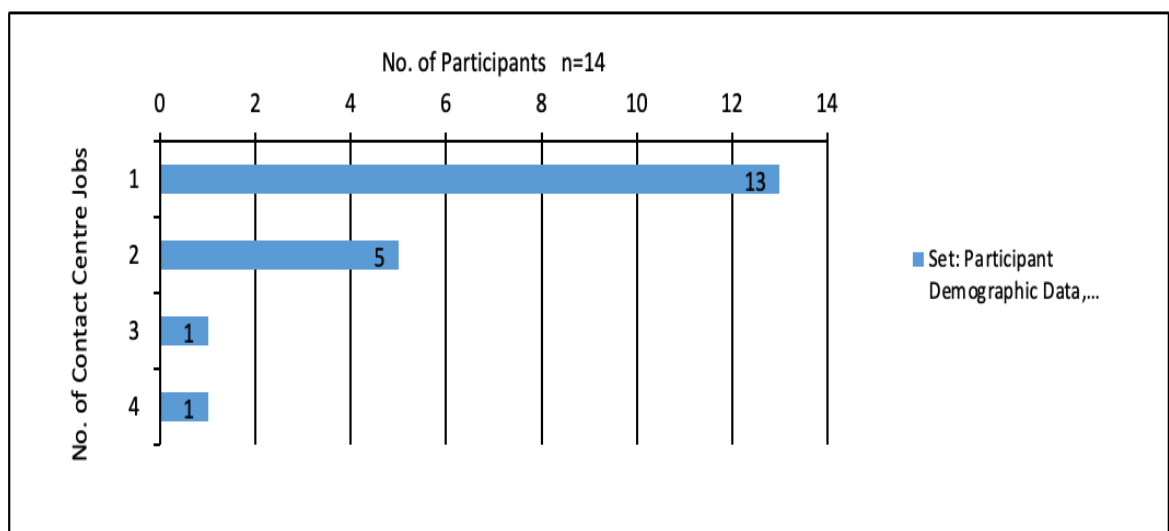
**“I took a break because it can be stressful at times, and then after that, I came here.”**

(P:18)

Figure eleven shows that thirteen of the 20 participants in this study (65%) have been in their roles for one year or more since limited opportunities existed elsewhere. Nevertheless, the contact centre provides young employees with several transferable skills, including communication, problem-solving and conflict management (Whitehead et al., 2023). Occupational social workers could act as career coaches to assist young people in recognising their professional abilities and developing their career goals.

**Figure 11**

*Number of Contact Centre Jobs held*



### 6.2.6 Organisation Distribution

The youth in the study were from four different contact centres, all located in Kwa-Zulu Natal. The companies ranged in service offering from customer service to sales with most participants working in sales. The highly competitive nature of contact centres meant that sharing detailed strategies and processes was guarded. It was, therefore, not possible to examine the learning and development strategies adopted by the organisations. There is a need for a



comparative analysis between organisations to understand human resource and people practices better. Table 7 represents an overview of the types of contact centres represented in the study.

**Table 7**

*Organisation Distribution*

|                         | <b>Contact centre 1</b>                              | <b>Contact centre 2</b>                              | <b>Contact centre 3</b>              | <b>Contact centre 4</b>              |
|-------------------------|------------------------------------------------------|------------------------------------------------------|--------------------------------------|--------------------------------------|
| No of Seats             | Approx. 750                                          | Approx. 1200                                         | Approx. 1000                         | Approx. 500                          |
| Location & Client Reach | Located in KZN<br>National & International Clientele | Located in KZN<br>National & International Clientele | Located in KZN<br>National Clientele | Located in KZN<br>National Clientele |
| Type of Service         | Sales & Service                                      | Sales & Service                                      | Sales & Service                      | Sales & Service                      |
| Types of Calls          | Outbound                                             | Outbound                                             | Inbound and Outbound                 | Inbound and Outbound                 |
| No. of Participants     | 8                                                    | 10                                                   | 1                                    | 1                                    |

Inbound contact centres are when customers call in to have technical problems solved, queries answered, or to enquire about services (Fieberg, 2014). Outbound contact centres are characterised by agents calling customers or clients to sell products or services or collect market research information (White & Roos, 2005). While four contact centres were involved in the study, most youth (n=18) participants were from two main contact centres. Ideally, an even

number of participants across the four contact centres would have ensured better representation. However, the poor response rate from some contact centres hampered an even sampling process.

Part two of the youth findings and discussion chapter is organised according to the main themes and sub-themes, with relevant excerpts and supporting literature discussed in each section. To provide structure to the youth analysis, Bronfenbrenner's (1979) bio-ecological system was utilised to organise the findings; the first part of the chapter explains how this is achieved.

### **6.3 Part Two: Overview of Selected Codes, Emergent Themes and Excerpts Utilising Bronfenbrenner's (1979) Bio-Ecological System**

The primary research question that framed the youth research is:

“What are the transition experiences of marginalised youth in the organisations they are employed in?”

To answer this question and fully understand youth transition experiences, the seminal ecological system work of Brofenbrenner was utilised. The excerpts shared in this section will illustrate the career narratives and felt experiences of young employees. Cochran (1991) and Savickas (2001) have written extensively on the story or narrative approach concerning career studies. Cochran (1991, p.20) writes, "In stories, significant relationships, models, events, resources, memories, anticipations and obstacles are made to cohere". The themes identified from the youth data reflect the youth stories. In particular, these stories relate to contact centre

work, the significance of family and workplace relationships as they transition to employment, and the socio-economic conditions that have shaped their experiences.

The youth data was organised using Bronfenbrenner's (1979) bioecological model, emphasising the interplay between the micro-, meso-, exo- and macro-level dimensions of youth development. Bronfenbrenner's (1979) multiple systems model is a valuable tool in analysing youth transition experiences as it provides a framework for understanding the complex context that impinges on youth as they transition to employment. Bronfenbrenner (1979) proposes that the developmental potential of any one context is enhanced when other known and trusted individuals accompany individuals as they transition between settings. Bronfenbrenner's work offers insight into exploring collaborative, holistic approaches for a private-public partnership to youth development. Furthermore, it could provide occupational social workers with an understanding and interpretation of the dynamics at play at the youth-work interface.

Bronfenbrenner's (1979) theory was further developed to include four major concepts: proximal processes, person characteristics, context, and time (PPCT). This became known as Bronfenbrenner's PPCT model. According to Rosa and Tudge (2013), the PPCT model accompanying the system's overview has received little attention in empirical studies. Xia et al. (2020) posit that though Bronfenbrenner put much effort into refining the theory, he provided little information on applying his theory and the PPCT model. An application of the PPCT model provides an essential understanding of human development. Bronfenbrenner's systems theory is utilised to understand the multiple dynamics at play for this study, focusing on youth transition to work. The PPCT model goes further than the theory to depict how the various systems interact. An in-depth examination of all four concepts is beyond the scope of this study. However,

proximal processes related to youth transition are beneficial (Bronfenbrenner & Morris, 1998) and are examined in a discussion of the themes below.

The specific objective of the youth component of the study was to explore the experiences and conditions that contribute towards a successful transition to work for marginalised youth. Van Manen's focus on individual lived experiences and Bronfenbrenner's ecological approach complement each other. According to Van Manen (2017, p.8), when examining lived experience, one must constantly ask, "How does this text speak to the meaning of experience as lived through?" Van Manen (2017) believes that the meaning of phenomenological reflection on a lived experience description should be based on the individual's subjective experience. Van Manen (2017) emphasises the importance of understanding the individual's subjective experience and avoiding any attempt to generalise or objectify their experience. To better understand the youth experiences an interview question tailored to allowing for an open-ended discussion was shared with participants. One such interview question was:

*Can you tell me about your experiences transitioning from unemployment to employment?*

The five main themes and sub-themes from the youth data are discussed in the next section and are presented in Table 8.

### **6.3.1 Youth Findings and Discussion**

The remainder of this chapter is focused primarily on the main youth findings and the discussion that emanates from this. In keeping with the core focus of the chapter attention will be

given to the meaning of the term findings. According to Cunningham et al. (2022), the customary term ‘findings’ is not entirely suitable for phenomenological studies as it suggests researchers uncover existing truths; rather, phenomenology indicates that results depend on the researcher, participants, and context, including literature and social influences; therefore, the term interpretations is deemed more appropriate. For the purposes of this chapter the terms findings and interpretations will be used interchangeably.

The five main themes from the data are organised according to Bronfenbrenner’s bio-ecological system (1979), while taking into account the context and social influences that impinge on the participants. The micro-, meso-, exo- and macro-systems, as categorised by Bronfenbrenner, encapsulate the themes that emerged from the youth data. Langdridge (2007) argues that phenomenology is both a philosophical movement and a family of qualitative research methodologies that focuses on people’s perceptions of the world in which they live and the meaning they derive from this. The views presented by Langridge show the complementary nature of the ecological systems approach and phenomenology. Phenomenological interpretation aligns to the primary research question which asks about the phenomenon and experiences of youth participants (Van Manen, 1990).

Table 8 presents a summary of the main themes and sub-themes that emerged from the youth data; the themes are organised according to Bronfenbrenner’s ecological systems. Each of these themes will be explored in the remainder of the chapter to provide a comprehensive understanding of youth transition experiences from the perspective of employers. The first theme on the key youth attributes that were uncovered in the data is discusse

**Table 8***Summary of the Main Youth Themes and Sub-themes*

| <b>Micro-system</b>                   |                                                                 | <b>Meso-system</b>                                                | <b>Exo-system</b>                                                                | <b>Macro-system</b>                                    |
|---------------------------------------|-----------------------------------------------------------------|-------------------------------------------------------------------|----------------------------------------------------------------------------------|--------------------------------------------------------|
| Main Theme 1:<br>Youth Attributes     | Main Theme: 2<br>Role of family and friends in work transition. | Main Theme 3:<br>Workplace relationships and transition to work.  | Main Theme 4:<br>Appropriateness of contact centre roles for marginalised youth. | Main Theme 5:<br>Challenging Socio-Economic Conditions |
| Sub-themes: 1                         | Sub-themes: 2                                                   | Sub-themes: 3                                                     | Sub-themes: 4                                                                    | Sub-themes: 5                                          |
| 1. Goal-orientated and hopeful        | 1. Support received and given to family/friends                 | 1. Peers create a sense of belonging and share common challenges. | 1. Organisation Rewards & Benefits                                               | 1. Limited Financial Means                             |
| 2. Open to learning/experience growth | 2. Friends and family as a network for employment               | 2. Team Leaders /Trainers are supportive                          | 2. Practical Organisation Support                                                | 2. Transport and Distance to Work                      |
|                                       | 3. Young mothers and transition to work                         |                                                                   | 3. Organisation Intervention to Increase Skill and Competence                    | 3. Impact of the Covid-19 pandemic                     |
|                                       |                                                                 |                                                                   | 4. Negative Contact Centre Experience and Conditions                             |                                                        |

### **6.3.2 Main Theme 1: Youth Attributes (The Micro-system)**

The micro-system, as the first structure in which developing individuals engage, affects all aspects of development (Bronfenbrenner 1979; Cowan and Swearer, 2004). While extensive research supports the notion that a person is the product of their environment (Bronfenbrenner & Morris, 1998; Halsall et al., 2018; Lerner, 2021; Woolcott et al., 2019), a deeper understanding of the micro-system is needed specifically in as far as the South African contact system is concerned. The number of marginalised youth entering the South African contact centre industry is projected to increase in the coming years, as South Africa is a top global contender for business process outsourcing and was named the top offshore Customer Experience destination in 2021 and 2022 by the Ryan Strategic Advisory (Williams & Pritchard, 2022).

If an appropriate policy environment were established and practical actions implemented, additional employment opportunities in the industry could be attained (Rogan et al., 2013). Therefore, fully exploring the experiences of marginalised youth at the work-youth interface is important for industry professionals. In line with this exploration, Bronfenbrenner & Morris (1998) highlight positive characteristics conducive to development that they term ‘developmentally generative’ qualities. From the data ‘developmentally generative’ qualities include goal orientation, hopefulness, and openness to learning and growth; these sub-themes are elaborated in the next section.

#### **6.3.2.1 Sub-theme: Goal-orientated and Hopeful**

Despite the problematic socio-economic circumstances, the data revealed that 17 of the 20 participants (85%) had a goal-oriented and hopeful outlook on their work life. Participant

seven quoted below, aptly captures the hopeful outlook by pointing to a future state but acknowledging that the ‘where comes from’ doesn’t determine the future.

“It doesn't matter where you come from if you know why you are here and **why you want the things that you want.**” (P:7)

The above quote powerfully illustrates Heidegger's concept of Dasein as being-towards-possibilities. Participants show an understanding of a future vision from where they are to a future-oriented hopeful disposition about owning their own car and house.

“One day, eventually, I will have my own car and house.” (P:14)

“It’s not where I want to be, **but I am hoping** that eventually, I will get there.” (P:1)

This hopeful disposition was common among participants, indicating that contact centre employment was better than unemployment. The participants see the contact centre as a launchpad towards achieving their life and career goals. There is a sense of engaging and being an active participant in their work circumstances. Since contact centres provide low-barrier entry-level employment and skill development, they could be the ideal launching point for youth lacking work experience. Six participants (30%) indicated their aspirations to progress in contact centre careers. Some excerpts of youth’s aspirations include:

“Being a team leader.” (P:16)

“**I see myself in Management;** that's how I see myself one day.” (P:15)



When peers received a promotion, this was encouraging for the participants. Two participants (P:19, P:20) were promoted to higher earning positions within the contact centre. Both P:19 and P:20 were promoted after one year of employment. These participants were placed in an in-house contact centre in the financial services sector. Findings from the study indicate that work provides a sense of direction for some young people, which aligns with the literature, suggesting that work offers hope for a better future and independence (Arnett, 2000; Honwana, 2012). Participants' being-in-the-world or Dasein includes an understanding of career progression and the hope for growth in the future. P:19 echoes this sentiment in the following powerful quote.

**“I felt a sense of purpose when I started working; I felt there is a purpose rather than just having nothing.” (P:19)**

The link between work and being-in-the-world is powerfully seen in the above statement. Work provides a structured way of being-in-the-world that offers direction and meaning. The participant's experience is supported by Brill (2021) who maintains that the meaning and purpose of work are important issues to consider. Brill argues that what is missing from the ILO's concept of decent work is a focus on the lived experience of the individual worker. The rich youth findings of work experience add to the literature and empirical evidence on what constitutes decent work.

Contact centres provide participants with a foot in the proverbial economic door; however, there appears to be limited movement beyond the front door of employment. Whether

or not being employed in a contact centre can deliver growth opportunities and significantly impact youth's earning potential needs further research attention.

According to Anwar and Graham (2019), there is concern about the nature of jobs in the BPO sector and whether these can be seen as jobs that can lead to career progression. Contact centres may provide a step out of the world of unemployment, but the question remains whether they genuinely open doors for marginalised youth to realise their hopes and aspirations. Whether or not contact centres can assist youth in fully realising their aspirations requires further longitudinal research.

#### **6.3.2.2 Sub-theme: Open to learning and Growth**

Eight participants (40%) expressed that learning was essential to absorb new knowledge and skills in a contact centre environment. Participant 20 succinctly stated the desire to learn:

**“It’s about learning from your mistakes** and ensuring that the next time you improve and do better.” (P:20)

The meaning ascribed to making mistakes was that there were lessons that could be gleaned from this. Going the extra mile by staying late after work and asking questions was common among youth in the study.

**“I was not afraid to ask and stay behind** trying to grasp everything that I can.” (P:7)

In the excerpt above, P:7 makes sense of her work experience with a resilient, forward-thinking attitude that focuses on improvement and growth. Being willing to sacrifice personal time for learning is a valuable attribute for an employer. In addition, growth emerged as a common theme among participants; 8 participants (40%) expressed that they experienced growth and learned new skills.

**“I learnt** about different people's behaviour and the environment at work.” (P:8)

**“It taught me** how to manage my time in the contact centre and to sharpen my mind and talking skills.” (P:9)

**“You learn** a lot about yourself in this particular space.” (P:19)

The importance of growth and learning was emphasised by participants (P:6, P:9, P:15, P:19). From a phenomenological interpretive viewpoint, the Heideggerian concepts of lived experience and everyday ordinariness, expounded on by Horrigan-Kelly et al. (2016) are closely linked to the meaning attached to learning in the workplace. The participants valued the everyday ordinariness of being at work as an important site for skill development and growth.

Participants mentioned their aspirations of becoming team leaders and quality controllers and being FAIS (Financial Advisory and Intermediary Services) accredited. According to Whitehead et al. (2023), contact centre employees acquire essential skills, such as customer service, customer engagement, and project management, which can be valuable in other fields like tourism, hospitality, and management consulting. Following youths' employment trajectory over a ten-year period could produce an essential understanding of the appropriateness of contact centres as a starting point in their career. There is a need for more information on promotion data

in the industry. Empirical research into the potential of contact centres to provide tangible growth opportunities could attract aspirational youth to the industry. Structured career pathing and talent development opportunities within the contact centre industry, which highlight promotion and growth opportunities that could serve both youth and the industry, need to be examined further. The youth had hope for their future and an idealistic notion of the possibilities in South Africa and the contact centre industry.

### **6.3.2.3 Discussion of Theme 1: Youth Attributes and Sub-Themes**

Snyder (2002) explains that hope as a multidimensional construct consists of an individual's 'willpower' and 'waypower'. While the willpower of youth in contact centres is demonstrated, the waypower or path to achieving their goals in the contact centre may be limited.

According to Snyder (2002) in Schiavon et al. (2017, p.2), the concept of Hope Theory is defined as a state of positive motivation based on three components:

- 1) "Goals and objectives (goals to be achieved);
  - 2) Pathways (plans to achieve these goals);
  - 3) Agency (motivation directed toward these goals and objectives)".
- Examining these three components of Hope Theory in relation to marginalised youth in contact centres reveals both the strengths and limitations of this employment context for youth development

#### ***Goals and Objectives***

The first of Snyder's (2002) tenets of Hope Theory is goals and objectives. Most youth (85%) expressed goal-orientedness and positivity towards their future. In a study of adolescent

youth in the Western Cape, Bray et al. (2010) found that youth similarly had high educational aspirations. Baldry et al. (2019) conducted a qualitative review of 12 youth-focused studies and found that across all of the studies, young people expressed a desire to make something of themselves and to be able to support or contribute towards their family financially.

Honwana (2012, p.21) posits that the youth period should be a “time of growth, of searching for meanings and belonging; a stage of moulding characters, interests and goals; constructing and reconfiguring identities; a creative period with both risks and possibilities”. Meier and Crocker (2010) argue that millennials are entering the workforce with determination, motivation, drive and inspiration, which, under the right circumstances, could make them the most fruitful and productive generation.

The economic reality for marginalised youth is that the ‘youth period’ is focused on survival and financial contribution to their extended families. Bray et al. (2010) found that even though poor African adolescents face grim prospects, most have grand ambitions and expectations and think their chances of realising these lie in their own hands.

While youth demonstrate goal-orientation, the pathway to independence is complicated by the family obligations that youth face, this is known as the ‘Black Tax’. Youth in the study felt a deep obligation to support their families. Magubane (2017) states that the phenomenon of contributing to relatives, siblings and the parental household in the African culture is known as the ‘Black Tax’. This is exercised when employed individuals are forced to make financial decisions detrimental to their financial prosperity. Communal support and displaying solidarity in the family work should ideally be both ways, i.e. giving and receiving family support. As much as young people receive support from families, there is an expectation that they are then

obligated to pay back money to families. The findings reveal a profound sense of stress linked to obligatory extended family black tax payments.

Contact centres are highly driven sales environments with clear, measurable sales targets. Contact centre employees are immersed in high-performance, high-stress environments where the motivation to achieve targets needs to be conjured up daily. Little is known about how the focus on being target and goal-driven impacts the youth's outlook and sense of identity and development. The environment could increase youth's ambition and drive; conversely, it could contribute to stress and burnout. Contact centre employers have the opportunity to create the 'right circumstances' for marginalised youth, which will serve both organisational and individual goals. The role that contact centres and supervisors play in young employees' character moulding requires research attention.

Vos et al. (2021) argue that resilient people maintain a more positive outlook and cope with stress more effectively. According to Theron and Theron (2010), resilience, or the phenomenon of 'bouncing back' from adversity, is common in societies that grapple with threatened well-being. South African youth in marginalised conditions are forced to find the means to survive. Following the assertion by Theron and Theron (2010), this may give youth the unique characteristics and ability to bounce back and demonstrate resilience. A research effort is required to examine the interplay of South African youth resilience, and the effect contact centre employment has on youth.

According to Adams and Marshall (1996), the identity development process is both an individual and social phenomenon. Dost-Gözkan et al. (2021) refer to positive youth identity as a sense of agency, self-determination, optimism and hope for one's life and future. Naidoo et al.

(2015) point out that young people's experiences of identity, belonging and citizenship are shaped by race, class, gender, sexuality, religious beliefs and other socio-structural factors.

### ***Pathways***

The second concept in Snyder's (2002) theory of hope is termed pathways; this focuses on the perceived ability to plan multiple routes to potential success. According to Avey et al. (2008), hope motivates individuals to attain success with the task at hand by looking for the best pathway. According to Snyder et al. (1991), waypower refers to one's ability to devise alternative pathways and contingency plans to achieve goals in the face of obstacles. The contact centre environment could be seen as an alternative pathway or a contingency plan following the inability to pursue tertiary studies.

Waypower, as described by Snyder et al. (1991), is similar in concept to resilience as defined by Van Breda (2018, p.4), who defines resilience as "the multilevel processes that systems engage in to obtain better-than-expected outcomes in the face or wake of adversity". Van Breda and Theron (2018) term this a social-ecological approach to resilience, which views the resilience of individuals as emanating from a range of systems in the individual's social environment.

The pathways available to youth within a contact centre are limited. According to Harry and Coetzee (2013), contact centre jobs are often equated to factory jobs or assembly lines based on the Tayloristic principles of job design. The contact centre environment is recognised as being one of the world's most stressful work environments (Harry & Coetzee, 2011; Jacobs & Roodt, 2011). The systems prevalent within the contact centre make pathways to growth and

development challenging for youth, which raises the question of the appropriateness of contact centres for marginalised youth. Contact centres could be considered beneficial if they act as pathways to development and growth. If, however, they are a stopgap that keeps youth locked into a cycle of limited income and limited means for progression, this then brings into question the suitability of contact centres for marginalised youth.

Youth in South African townships lack mentors and networks where information on ‘multiple routes to success’ can be discussed. Additionally, there is a lack of career guidance in schools. In the study by Bray et al. (2010), many young people raised concerns about the lack of, or provision of low-quality career guidance. Baldry et al. (2019) cite several empirical studies that showed that although career guidance is included in the school curriculum, some report never having received any, while others found the career guidance, they received to be inadequate (De Lannoy et al., 2015; De Lannoy, 2016; De Lannoy et al., 2018a; Graham et al., 2017; Graham et al., 2019a; Graham et al., 2019b).

### *Agency*

According to Snyder (2002), the last determinant of hope theory is agency, which is the motivation directed toward goals and objectives. Hearn (2012) defines agency as ‘the intentions and actions of individuals and groups in pursuing their goals. The definition of agency, as described above, is a part of the individual's motivation and intention but does not consider the varying socio-economic circumstances and power relations that cause goals and objectives to be challenging to reach. Dedman (2011) argues that agency is the ability of individuals to operate through their own active will, regardless of wider social structures that may otherwise limit the



choices available. The tension between youth agency and the social structures that impede agency must be considered when discussing ‘marginalised’ youth experiences.

Snyder (2002) referred to high-hope individuals as embracing the self-talk agentic phrases such as “I can do this” and “I am not going to be stopped”. Participants in this study expressed agentic phrases such as:

“One day, eventually, **I will have my own car and house**. So, I think it is all like in your mindset to be strong. (P:13)

“**I see myself in Management**; that is how I see myself one day.” (P:15)

Despite challenging socio-economic and educational circumstances, the findings from this study concur with the Baldry et al. (2019) in that many young people exercise significant agency and go to great lengths, in the face of limited information and finances, to access opportunities to ‘upskill’ themselves (Bray et al., 2010; De Lannoy, 2008; Graham et al., 2019a; Newman & De Lannoy, 2014). In this study, sixty-five per cent of participants pursued tertiary education, with twenty-five per cent graduating and forty per cent not completing their studies. A dominant theme was investing in oneself and the future through continued learning and education.

“Maybe **going back to school** and studying.” (P:3)

“Yes, but I would love to go back to studying.” (P:1)

“**I wanted to study** to be an air hostess. They told me that I had to be 21 and over. I couldn't do anything then. So, I just came and worked here.” (P:14)

In addition to formal education, eight of the 20 participants (40%) expressed openness to learning and experienced growth.

**“It taught me how to manage my time** in the contact centre and to sharpen my mind with my listening and talking skills.” (P:9)

**“You learn a lot about yourself** in this particular space.” (P:19)

The level of positivity that the youth in this study exuded was surprising given the challenging circumstances they faced. Most youth felt hope for their future and were forward-looking for better circumstances. Youth in these poor circumstances had a shared experience of poverty. They had also never experienced financial security and economic stability, making the shared hardship experience par for the course. There was an overwhelming hopefulness when interviewing participants; it was apparent that youth were grateful for the opportunity to earn an income and gain experience.

In summary, marginalised youth show positive attitudes to their growth and development with a high degree of hopefulness, despite challenging socio-economic circumstances. The economic conditions experienced make attaining personal goals and objectives challenging to achieve. South African youth’s resiliency and positive attitude are assets to contact centres that deserve nurturing and support. Schartz et al. (2017, p.1084), in a study of more than five hundred Zulu youth, concluded that while “individuals have developmental plasticity, their social ecology can and must change for the better.” The developmental plasticity and ability to adapt to challenging circumstances are evident in this study. The author concurs with Schartz et al. (2017) that a change in the fabric of the economy and social ecology is needed for the true

potential and power that South African youth possess to be realised. The data on youth's aspirations and hopefulness, despite difficult circumstances, provides one with pride for the resilience shown but likewise shows that there is much work to be done to match aspiration and meaningful work attainment.

### **6.3.3 Main Theme 2: Role of Family and Friends in Work Transition (The Micro-system)**

Family played a positive role for many participants. Eleven of the 20 participants (55%) expressed receiving support and assistance from their families. The findings in this study concur with Gallie's (2004) view that parental and community support are critical contributors to youth transitions. South African research by De Lannoy et al. (2018a) similarly found that youth relied on support from close family members to continue the work.

Heidegger (1927) coined the term Dasein to express that our existence is always interconnected with others, known as relatedness or 'being-with'. According to Lavery (2003), 'Dasein', as described by Heidegger, is the situated meaning of a human in the world. The complexity of interconnected human relations in the workplace, and where and how employees are situated, brings positive and challenging experiences. As can be seen in the research study, 12 of the 20 participants (60%) expressed that they found supporting their families challenging. The three sub-themes identified under the family and friend central theme were: 1) Receiving family support and giving family support, 2) Family and friends as a network of opportunity and 3) Young mothers and the transition to work.

### 6.3.3.1 Sub-theme: Family Support

Family support ranged from assistance with transportation to the care of dependants to receiving advice and encouragement. Research has shown that resource sharing within and between households is a critical strategy for survival for many poor households and can result in better education, employment and income (Hall & Mokomane, 2018). Mullen et al. (2003) found that the impact of the work-family interface on well-being had both positive and negative effects. This finding aligns with evidence from the youth data, where young single mothers reported receiving family support in caring for their young children:

**“My mother fetches my son** from the creche when she comes back from work.” (P:3)

**“My mom helps me,** and she gives me advice.” (P:13)

**“So, I stayed at home, and my dad looked after everyone.** (P:6)

The participant quotes above refer to the support they sought and received from their parents. These quotes illustrate how Heidegger’s concept of being-with is apparent in participants' day-to-day relationships and how this assistance shapes participant’s experience of transitioning to work.

However, the reciprocal nature of family relationships means that youth not only receive support but are obligated to provide financial support to families. This is evident with twelve participants (60%) mentioned that they felt obligated to support their family financially despite it being a financial challenge. Some participants expressed a sense of pride in helping their families. The following participants aptly expressed this:

**“I was able to build a house at home. I'm adding value to the community. I'm adding value at home.” (P:7)**

**“I was able to buy groceries.” (P:10)**

For some participants, supporting their families was a challenge.

**“Even when you are not working, you are expected to contribute at home” (P:8)**

**“When you work, people automatically think you have money.” (P:6)**

**“It's a good thing to have a salary; it's not much, but there are people that you are taking care of, with the little money that you have.” (P:5)**

Participants mentioned the pressure to provide for the family as a reason that participants got into financial debt. According to research conducted by Baldry et al. (2018), young people have both dependency and caring responsibilities for others, such as children and older family members. These responsibilities are often overlooked and can affect their ability to seize opportunities.

Participants in this study expressed that they were not coping well financially as they had many individuals in the family household to support.

**“I spend more than I make because there's a lot of us at home, and you can't help just one person.” (P:6.)**

**“I was stressed out that I'm not working. I have a qualification, but I'm not contributing at home.” (P:8)**

‘Black tax’ or the obligation to assume financial support within the African community can have a compounding impact on the ability of an individual to develop personal financial independence (Magubane, 2017). In this study, some young people mentioned being stuck in a poverty cycle where they ‘spend more than they make’ and ‘are still expected to contribute at home’. It is clear from these responses that a heavy financial burden mars the experience of transition to work and adulthood for marginalised youth. Even though contact centres provide employment, the poverty cycle, with many in a family seeking relief from one salary, keeps youth and families below the poverty line.

#### **6.3.3.2 Sub-Theme: Access to Jobs through a Network of Friends and Family**

Seven of the 20 (35%) participants found their current role through family and friends.

**“A friend of mine told me** that they are hiring.” (P:9)

“This job was referred by one of my friends.” (P:13)

Two participants learned about the work opportunity from a neighbour in their community.

**“My friend and neighbour** used to work there and told me about it.” (P:17)

“My neighbours worked there.” (P:2)

A review of the literature shows that youth lack the necessary networks to assist them in developing their careers; this lack of social capital in the workplace keeps youth locked out of

employment opportunities (De Lannoy, 2018; Haider, 2016). Baldry (2019) posits that youth rely on word of mouth for information regarding employment and education opportunities.

Participants in this study have networks that have opened doors of employment for them in the contact centre. Many youth in this study were told about the contact centre opportunity through friends or neighbours. Information on jobs is dependent on youth's access to employed population groups. Since many of their friends and family only have access to entry-level roles in contact centres, this cycle of information in their networks is passed on. These limited networks inadvertently keep high-potential youth 'stuck' in low-paying entry-level roles. In households or communities with few employed people, youth are not exposed to the information and networks required to access training, education and employment opportunities in high-paying and high-growth roles.

Participants in the study may not require networks as they inform that contact centre jobs are readily available. Seven of the 20 (35%) participants expressed that contact centre jobs were easy to attain.

**“Contact centres hire people almost every day.” (P:16)**

**“With contact centres, you're always going to get a job.” (P:3)**

Besides the physical connection to potential employment, family and friends play an essential role in the emotional support youth need to access employment. However, contact centres have low barriers to entry, such as minimum experience and only a matric certificate, which is needed, making this a well-positioned first job for marginalised youth. Participants in the study acknowledged that contact centre roles in South Africa are readily available. Access to entry-level contact centre roles may be relatively easy, but access to networks that can help

young people secure higher-paying positions may not be as readily available (De Lannoy, 2018; Haider, 2016).

### **6.3.3.3 Sub-theme: Young Mothers and Transition to Work.**

Seven of the 20 participants (35%) had dependants ranging in age from one years old to seven years old. All seven participants expressed that caring for a child while transitioning to work was challenging.

**“You have to stay up if he’s still up even though you want to sleep. In the morning, you must do many things before you go to work”. (P:3)**

According to Inwood (2019), Dasein enables human beings to respond to circumstances and choose their being. The parental experience of staying awake with a child while needing to prepare for work illustrates Heidegger's concept of Dasein managing competing demands but still choosing to show up as a parent and employee. This lived experience demonstrates how parents must authentically engage with their immediate responsibilities while simultaneously considering future obligations, showing how Dasein manifests in everyday moments rather than remaining theoretical. According to one participant (P:17), she tried to pursue tertiary studies but found this challenging with a young child.

**“I studied at UNISA when my baby was smaller, and I couldn't manage my studies.”**

**(P:17)**

Female youth and young mothers transitioning to work require special attention. This sentiment is echoed by Anyhido (2012), who states that the categories of youth needing special



attention are female and pregnant adolescent youth. The transition needs of young mothers and their children differ from those of young people without dependants. Organisations employing young people should be cognisant of young mothers' needs. The next section discusses social support utilising Schlossberg's (1981) 'four S theory, namely 1) situation, 2) self, 3) support, and 4) strategies.

#### **6.3.3.4 Discussion of Theme 2: Role of Family and Friends in Work Transition**

According to Schlossberg's (1981) four S theory - the self and how one sees oneself in the transition process influences the outcome of the transition to work. This view is quite individualistic and relies much on one's internal perspective. In line with Schlossberg's (1981) view, how youth experience their work, family, and peers influences their sense of belonging and ability to successfully transition to their next developmental phase. Paulsen and Berg (2016) similarly view social support during the transition from school to work as critical in shaping the future of young people. These authors refer to various forms of support, including practical support, emotional support, affirmational guidance support and participation support. Participants in this study both gave and received support; this was especially needed in the case of child-rearing and transport to and from work.

McAdams et al. (2006), adds that youth face the twin identity questions: "*Who am I?*" and "*What is my place in this world?*". The interaction of a supportive family and friends network could help resolve the youth's identity questions. This view reflects the principles of constructivism which advocate for individuals to be actively engaged in their environment and to seek development through social interaction and collaboration (Akpan et al., 2020).

Regarding Heidegger's philosophy, Alawa (2017) likewise posits that to be human is to look at the past as a source of history and that the human being gives definition and direction to life and thus gives meaning to the world in which s/he lives. Lerner (2021) similarly argues that young people placed into positive-development-promoting circumstances could be changed positively. The positive youth development framework developed by Lerner et al. (2021) explores the mutually influential relations between individuals and their peers, family, school, and community contexts. Human resource professionals employing youth could draw on the principles and premise of a positive youth development framework.

The adage that it takes a village to raise a child holds for participants in this study. The overwhelming support from grandparents is evident for all young mothers in the study. Starting a new role and attending to childcare duties is challenging for young mothers. Young working mothers received not just physical support but, more importantly, emotional support from their families. Adapting to the new lifestyle changes puts pressure on young people. The long work hours and care for a young child require support from the extended family unit. Young mothers in the study mentioned that their health and well-being was strained, with long nights and busy days leaving them little time for themselves.

A beneficial research exercise would be to explore the role that organisations could play in providing childcare support for employees' young children. Providing for the needs of young mothers may attract more young mothers to the industry and give contact centres that offer childcare facilities a competitive advantage. According to a study conducted by the International Finance Corporation in 2017, there are significant benefits to the private sector from investing in

employer-supported childcare facilities, including attendance, retention and productivity gains. According to the report, the availability of childcare gives employees confidence that their children are in a safe place, incentivising them to work longer hours while reducing the rate of staff turnover. Employers can, therefore, enjoy savings on new employee training and recruitment costs (IFC, 2017).

Salamaso et al. (2021) reported on an in-house childcare facility run by Safaricom, a telecommunications company and the largest company in Kenya. Safaricom covers operating costs and contracts an external provider to operate the childcare facilities. Contact centres in South Africa have an opportunity to explore in-house childcare facilities and leverage lessons from other telecommunication organisations on the benefits to the employee and the employer. Occupational Social Workers can advocate for exploring the potential of in-house childcare facilities.

#### **6.3.4 Main Theme 3: Workplace Relationships and Transition to Work (Meso-System)**

According to Bronfenbrenner (1977), the meso-system constitutes the series of relationships that the developing person experiences in his/her life, within the major settings that make up their world. The following section examines the prominent relationships that emerged from the data, namely peer and team leader relationships. According to a United Nations report (2015b), it is crucial for youth transitioning to employment to form positive relationships that lead to successful transitions to adulthood. The report emphasised that every country, particularly those with increasing youth populations, should increase their efforts to ensure that young people can build healthy relationships. Gallie (2004) concurs with this view, which highlights that peer

associations and parental and community support are critical contributors to the transitions of at-risk youth into contexts of resilience and meaningful work associations.

Youth-in-context is explored from the person-specific characteristics which Bronfenbrenner and Morris (1998) termed force, resource, and demand. The scope of this study allows for a discussion on only ‘force.’ Force characteristics are those dynamic personality qualities that can either foster or sustain proximal processes or interfere with or prevent their occurrence. In this study force characteristics were revealed through analysing participants experiences of workplace interactions.

According to Xia et al. (2020), proximal processes are the reciprocal interactions between developing human beings. Following the Xia et al. (2020) definition of proximal processes, the reciprocal interactions that youth experience with team leaders, peers and customers in the workplace could serve to either foster or interfere with the development of positive youth personality qualities. The contact centre environment could aid the development of a positive youth identity, or it could act as an impediment to the developmental identity of youth. Findings indicate that peer relationships positively influenced youth transition to work. The following section explores peer relationships in more detail.

#### **6.3.4.1 Sub-theme: The Role of Peers in Transition to Work.**

##### ***Belonging and Feeling Welcome***

Peer relationships emerged as a dominant theme in the data. Eighteen of the 20 participants (90%) noted that peer relationships positively impacted their transition to

employment. Belonging emerged as an important theme, with 14 participants stating that their relationships with their peers made them feel a sense of belonging and inclusion. According to Howana (2012), the youth period should be a time of growth, searching for meaning and belonging. The sense of belonging is a fundamental theme in light of the social exclusion that youth experience as they transition to employment. According to Maslow's (1943) hierarchy of needs, the love needs – which include striving for love and affection and belongingness needs rank right after the basic physiological and safety needs. Shore et al. (2018) highlight that adverse experiences of exclusion result in marginalised employees being less likely to feel integrated in the workplace. Contrary to Shore et al.'s assertion, findings from the study show that participants felt an overwhelming positive sense of integration. The following excerpts demonstrate this:

“You feel **included**.” (P:19)

“But my team, **we work as a family**.” (P:6)

“We are friends both here during office hours and outside.” (P:15)

The maxim ‘you never get a second chance to make a first impression’ forms the basis of the theme of feeling welcome and is aptly captured in the excerpt:

**“It was so amazing meeting people and being welcomed nicely; it made a good first impression.”** (P:20)

Sixteen of the 20 participants (80%) referenced a welcoming environment as a positive first experience of the work environment.

**“There was a lot of support** starting from managers and colleagues. I think **everyone's very welcoming.**” (P:19)

**“The people, they're very nice, they're very caring. So, I think that's what made it easy.”** (P:7)

**“Honestly, this place is welcoming. Everyone here is friendly.”** (P:1)

### ***Problem-Solving with Peers***

Ten participants (50%) stated that sharing challenges and problem-solving with peers assisted in coping with the work transition. Similarly, Theron and Theron (2010) found that peer support played a significant role in that youth could talk to their peers about troubling matters and trust them to help with any problems they may face.

“I remember that I did not have transport money. A friend of mine, whom I met at this contact centre, helped me.” (P:16)

“They were more understanding, saying you will get through this. “This is what we do to cope.” (P:4)

**“There was too much support,** especially when it comes to my family and my colleagues. We got along, and they really helped me. **We help each other with personal issues.**” (P:20)

Positive peer and group relationships are correlated with positive social identity development. Individuals are motivated to develop positive social identities based on group membership (Tajfel, 1978a; Tajfel, 1978b). The contact centre environment creates the space and environment for belonging needs to be met, and the positive peer relationships assist not only on

a practical level but also contribute to developing positive social identities. In summary the core phenomenon that participants experienced of peers was positive and engendered a profound sense of belonging and camaraderie.

### ***Bullying and Competition***

One participant mentioned that she experienced a negative peer relationship at the beginning of her transition to employment.

**“In my first year, I was bullied because I made my target. So that's where the bullying came in.” (P:7)**

The participant mentioned that she did not have the means to find support or safely report the matter, which may have affected her job security as it was a new role. Safe spaces must be created for employees to receive support should they experience challenges. Three participants stated that competition to excel and achieve a higher social status was a driving force among peers.

**“It’s a competition** when it comes to cars. Every month somebody's buying a car.”  
(P:20)

**“You see your peers studying, getting jobs,** left, right centre, and you're getting even nothing.” (P:5)

Competition to achieve life goals, such as purchasing houses and cars, could be a positive driver. It is positive because it can contribute towards goal-directedness and healthy financial management. From the responses above, one can see the value of healthy competition. It was encouraging to hear how participants are motivated to improve their living circumstances by

purchasing goods, such as cars and other status-enhancing purchases. According to Vaid (2009), many young BPO employees associated their increased independence and self-efficacy with their employment in the sector.

There is a place for healthy competition, but since youth are in a low earning bracket, spending more than they make was also a prominent theme in the study. Youth in new roles may benefit from financial literacy to assist in developing healthy savings habits and not be swept away by the drive to acquire status-enhancing goods. According to a report on global financial literacy, it has been found that only around thirty-three per cent of adults possess financial literacy, which highlights the existence of a financial literacy gap between developed and developing countries (Klapper et al., 2015).

Outlets for expressing stress - to supervisors, managers or counsellors — need to be established to reduce the stress experienced. Awareness-building efforts are required that address the harmful effects of alcohol, tobacco and drug abuse, as well as to withstand peer pressure in these areas. Workplace professionals, such as occupational social workers and organisational psychologists, could assist in putting in place systems and processes, such as whistleblower policies, where safe and anonymous reporting can occur.

#### **6.3.4.2 Sub-Theme: Experiences of Team Leader/Manager Relationships**

Supportive team leader/manager relationships emerged as a dominant theme in the data, with 16 of the 20 participants (80%) reporting that they experienced support, encouragement and motivation from their team leads. Transparent communication was cited by six of the 20 participants. Patience was mentioned by four out of the 20 participants.



**“Yes, they're always there to help us, train and coach us.” (P:8)**

**“My team leader's very nice; she understands she's been on the dialler before.” (P:3)**

Six of the 20 (30%) participants mentioned that a feature of a supportive manager relationship included the availability of team leaders to assist.

**“People who have experience with the supervisor, here because if you have an issue, they always find a way to resolve it.” (P: 9)**

Four of the 20 participants experienced challenging team-leader relationships. The challenges ranged from pressure to make sales to perceived racism.

**“Pressure from team leaders & from the managers.” (P:5)**

It was an international contact centre with odd hours, **and I lost weight. It was stressful.**  
(P:2)

**“He was racist because he would separate the teams.” (P:1)**

Participant (17) felt that there was a gap between managers and agents and that managers didn't value agents.

**“Management doesn't take agents seriously, and they don't value agents.” (P:17)**

The excerpts above show a range of mixed sentiments from participants. While there were predominantly (80%) positive experiences of team leaders, some participants experienced challenges (40%) in their relationships. The last excerpt on not feeling valued is the antithesis of

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integration and shows a misalignment between organisation objectives and participants' lived reality. Transparent communication and patience were a key characteristic that participants mentioned they valued in a team leader relationship. In the next section, a discussion of workplace relationships and their impact on the transition to work will be expanded.

#### **6.3.4.3 Discussion Main Theme 3: Workplace Relationships and Transition to Work**

The new employees' experience with their manager sets the tone for integrating into the workplace. Managers assist youth in building self-belief and confidence. Marginalised youth, in particular, enter the workplace with low confidence (Di Fabio & Palazzeschi, 2016). For many unemployed youths, securing a job offer and entering the workforce can help boost their confidence. However, earning a manager's trust and belief in their abilities to perform and succeed is often a new and uncharted territory. Youth look up to their managers as role models, especially if they lack guidance and support from their families and communities. Managers play an important role in young employees' lives (Osborn & Hammoud, 2017).

The effect of unemployment and economic instability, together with the new job demands, drive the disillusionment and the sense of 'do I belong'? Reassurance and encouragement from the manager could help close this gap. It moves the internal narrative from 'do I belong' to 'I feel I belong'. A large and growing body of literature has investigated belonging in identity development and the workplace (Allen et al., 2018; Boelens et al., 2017; Cho et al., 2017).

Lerner et al. (2015) proposed that youth thrive when in psychologically and socially safe spaces that contain the following three characteristics:

- 1) positive and sustained relations with a caring, competent, and reliably committed adult, such as a mentor, coach, teacher, or faith leader (Rhodes, 2020)
- 2) life skills building experiences; and
- 3) opportunities to participate in and take a leadership role.

The insights from Lerner et al. (2015) align with the characteristics that youth employees value in team leaders.

Eighty- percent of participants in the study reported having supportive team leader/manager relationships. Millennials value a relational rather than transactional manager-employee relationship (Myers & Sadaghiani, 2010). According to Roman-Caldreon et al. (2019), providing feedback in an effective manner can be a useful strategy for promoting positive behaviour and discouraging negative behaviour. A manager-employee relationship where feedback is prioritised will go a long way in developing the youth in the workplace. The reality of large contact centres with a majority youth population is that feedback and mentoring may not be viable options for managers, given the size of the contact centre and the ratio of agents to managers. Harry and Coetzee (2009) argue that enhancing contact centre agents' sense of meaningfulness will significantly increase their career adaptability, which may result in more positive work attitudes and well-being in the contact centre environment.

Occupational social workers could play a role in training team leaders and trainers working with marginalised youth. Team leaders working with a predominantly youth demographic could play a key role in supporting the development of marginalised youth identity.

Contact centre team leaders play the dual role of team leader and organisational youth workers. The principles of youth work are transferable to the team leader role. Youth participants benefit from interacting with well-trained youth workers (DuBois et al., 2002).

During a visit to the contact centre, observations about the intentionality and camaraderie among new hires waiting to be onboarded provided important insights on the experience of the workplace and how attention to detail and creating a welcoming environment is important. The "cosy coffee shop" atmosphere and thoughtful amenities such as the water station and vending machine demonstrate an organisational consciousness in creating a welcoming space that reduces anxiety and promotes dignity in the role and the job-seeking process. In addition, the waiting room observation demonstrated how informal support networks and relationships are formed at the beginning of the work experience. The social bonds and strong ties create an invisible safety net for peers that could contribute to positive work transition experiences.

In summary, workplace relationships, particularly those with team leaders, play a positive role in youth transition to work. In addition, this primary workplace relationship plays a crucial role in building self-esteem, fostering belonging and confidence and aiding youth in their professional development.

#### **6.3.5 Main Theme 4: Appropriateness of Contact Centre Roles for Marginalised Youth (Exo-System)**

The central theme under discussion is the appropriateness of the contact centre for marginalised youth. Seventeen of the 20 participants (85%) shared the sentiment that contact centres were beneficial places of employment. The following excerpts highlight this view:

**“Getting the job was a great experience** for me because now I could take care of myself.” (P:16)

“It's like **my second home**. My life right now. It's so **amazing**.” (P:20)

“With this company, **you can grow**. I'm doing the FAIS certification. (P:14)

“I think coming here helped me because, looking back, it has been tough in my life, and **“I'm now getting income**, having to help at home.” (P:15)

The findings align with Bronfenbrenner's (1979) systems model; the contact centre as a work environment is located in the exo-system and provides values, resources and context to the developing person's beliefs, traditions, and culture. According to Rus et al. (2010), the exo-systems provide a foundation and environment where supportive relationships can thrive. One participant described the contact centre as a 'second home', and another mentioned that it is a place 'they can grow'; this illustrates that the contact centre is a positive environment and an ideal transition environment for marginalised youth. Other aspects of the environment could be improved; one such area is the rewards and benefits offered by contact centres. The next section discusses the findings about rewards and benefits.

#### **6.3.5.1 Sub-theme: Organisational Rewards & Benefits.**

Eight of the 20 (40%) participants expressed that working in a contact centre allowed them to reward themselves and support their families. Wellins et al. (2007) posit that recognition for employees emerges as one of the most critical factors influencing employee commitment to their employers. Similarly, Pereira and Anderson (2012) found that rewards and cultural context influence employees' behaviour. The positive excerpts below demonstrate the value that rewards

and benefits play in driving positive workplace behaviour and meeting the felt needs of employees.

**“I get to have my own money now that I am employed. I get a chance to even contribute at home.” (P:8)**

**“I'm adding value to the community I was able to build a house at home.” (P:7)**

However, the types of rewards that employees receive need to be tailored to the immediate needs of employers. Pereira and Anderson (2012) are of the view that a one-size-fits-all approach to managing employee behaviour may not work. In crafting employees' work experience, attention must be given to meaningful rewards and benefits. The authors suggest that employers consider the unique cultural and organisational context when designing incentive systems. In the contact centre rewards range from commission for sales to appliances. As discussed in the next section some benefits include meeting basic needs such as food and transport.

**“There's commission and other benefits like prizes such as TVs, microwaves, and fridges that people have won, and it's like money it's good.” (P:16)**

**“Company-wise, I was very happy about the commission structure. I got my bonus ever since I came here.” (P:6)**

**“Life is very nice making sales and making a commission.” (P:20)**

The next section examines the findings on organisational support. This is an important focus for organisations employing marginalised youth as youth are unable to fully integrate

without the basic necessities such as safe transport and a meal. Nassar-McMillan et al. (2017), concur that programmes for low-income and ethnic minority youth should be responsive to individual experiences of marginalisation.

#### **6.3.5.2 Sub-theme: Practical Organisation Support.**

Five (25%) youth participants felt that the contact centre providing them with a meal was much needed and beneficial. In addition to food four (20%) participants mentioned support with transport as contributing to positive transition to employment experiences.

“They assisted us with transport and even food.” (P:11)

“They **provided us with a bus fare** and a meal once a day during training.” (P:9)

Understanding your workforce and designing benefits that closely meet essential needs is important. However, moving beyond the provision of the basics to more aspirational rewards such as promotion for performance or assistance with study loans will assist participants to move out of their current earning bracket to higher paying salaries. The next section examines the role organisations play in building capacity and competence in junior employees

#### **6.3.5.3 Sub-Theme: Organisation Intervention to Increase Skill and Competence.**

At the beginning of their work experience, most participants, 19 (95%), expressed having difficulty adapting to work. In this study, 12 participants (60%) felt that they lacked experience, knowledge and self-confidence as they entered the work environment.

The excerpts below detail the nature of the difficulty, which range from the environment being new and challenging to sales targets that were hard to meet.

“**Adjusting was hard for me.** The most challenging part was adapting to a new environment.” (P:16)

“It was **challenging at first** because it was something new.” (P:1)

“It was **tough at first** because I was never exposed to this world of working and work environments. (P:18)

Ten participants expressed that reaching sales targets was particularly challenging:

“**It was really difficult at first**, having to meet targets and having to adapt to this environment.” (P:15)

“You have a target to meet; sometimes **it's very hard.**” (P:5)

“It is challenging to reach my target every day.” (P:12)

Adapting to a professional environment's work culture and expectations also proved challenging for some participants.

“I think they need to train from scratch on what is expected of you regarding uniform, dress, language, and addressing your managers and peers. I don't really have formal clothes. I'm not really used to the contact centre environment.” (P:4)

Walmsley (2015) states that transitions from education to work affect not only those with low education attainment but youth at all levels. Contact centres have created robust coaching, training and work readiness interventions. Findings indicate that marginalised youth benefit from



the supportive interventions. There was a deep sense of gratitude from participants for the workplace, which assisted at a material, as well a learning and development level, which appears to balance the experience.

**“They train us every week and always coach us.” (P:8)**

**” You do have the training,** and after that, you have another month to **buddy up** with old, experienced agents.” (P:17)

**“There's a nesting group.” (P:6)**

A nesting group or incubator is a portion of the contact centre where new hires can implement learnings from the training. Six of the 20 participants (30%) expressed that they benefited from being part of experiential training. Nesting groups are small groups that provide intensive coaching and low targets to ease youth into the transition to work and provide gradual speed to competence. Some of the contact centres offer a work environment that is less complex and demanding at the beginning. Participants benefited from being linked to an experienced co-worker. This is called ‘buddying up or having immediate access to a second in command (2IC), a experience agent working closely with the Team Leader to support new hires.

**“You have another month where you buddy up with old, experienced agents. My 2IC (second in command) was very supportive,** especially in sales departments; it was there.” (P:17)

The seating arrangements in contact centres are well thought out, with new contact centre agents being placed next to more seasoned agents.

**“I will ask my neighbour** before my team leader.” (P:8)

**“My neighbour noticed and helped** me out because they were sitting next to me, so they could see if I'm doing something wrong.” (P:7)

**“It was easy to adapt** because we were recruited as switchboard operators, which were easier. If we had to start at another department, we would feel the pressure.” (P:20)

Sixteen (80%) participants stated they benefited from regular supportive contact/coaching from their team leaders, reiterating the valuable role that team leaders play in assisting youth adapt to work.

The skills and experience gap was addressed by Work Readiness programmes offered by not-for-profit social partners and contact centres. Twelve participants in this study (60%) indicated attending work readiness programmes. Despite attending a work readiness programme, eight participants felt they lacked the confidence and experience when transitioning to work. This finding indicates that marginalised youth require more than work readiness programmes to prepare them for the world of work.

The data showed that as a result of the coaching, training and time/experience at work gave youth confidence and a sense of belief in their ability to achieve. Ten participants felt confident and settled in their roles after coaching and time in the new role.

**“It took a while;** I made a lot of mistakes. The first two weeks, I even thought that they would let me go. But eventually, I caught up.” (P:6)

**“It is amazing here. I got used to working, actually, and I started loving it.” (P:20)**

The growth in skill and experience resulted in nine participants expressing a deep sense of pride.

**“Transitioning to working is a huge achievement. You finally feel like you’re equal in a society; you feel proud of yourself. You have value.” (P:19)**

**“I’m adding value to the community. I’m adding value at home. So, I’ll say it is nice. I was able to build a house at home.” (P:7)**

Four out of 20 participants discussed that the training allowed them to grow in confidence.

**“The trainers help us gain more confidence.” (P:12)**

Then, when they told me how a contact centre is, I realised that it's something I'll be able to do. (P:18). Eight of the 20 participants (40%) mentioned that understanding the job was essential to adapting to their environment.

**“You have to understand your role, I think, to be able to do what is expected of you.” (P:19)**

**“We actually knew what we were getting into.” (P:10)**

There are clear expectations from the organisation which are understood by all staff. It is not just the expectation of the role but also ensuring that workplace norms and rules are maintained, which is essential. This participant understands the consequences of not adapting to

the organisation's norms. Furthermore, 10 participants (50%) felt confident in their role once they understood what was expected.

**“As time went by, I got a hold of things that others could do.” (P:1)**

**“Toward the second year, it was easy because I was now familiar with the system.”**

**(P:7)**

Ten of the 20 participants (50%) described the training stage as a positive experience. Eight participants attributed their positive training experience to their relationship with their team leaders.

**“The trainers were friendly.” (P:6)**

**“When I got here, the trainers were amazing. He never for a moment made us feel like we can't do this.” (P:10)**

**“The trainers were friendly, and they played fun games. They made training educationally fun.” (P:6)**

The data revealed that eight of the 20 participants (40%) expressed that their training experience was helpful. Contact centres invest quite heavily in training support. The intentional onboarding, work readiness, coaching, nesting groups, buddying up and even seating arrangements show that contact centres are well positioned to create an environment for learning and growth but more especially a suitable work environment where marginalised youth can settle into work well and receive the upskilling, coaching and mentoring needed. It is not all positive, though; there were some participants who expressed that they had negative contact centre

experiences; like all good evaluative work, it is important that contact centres take the constructive feedback from participants seriously and build interventions based on both positive and negative. For some participants, there was a disconnect between the training environment and the reality of work,

#### **6.3.5.4 Sub-Theme: Negative Contact Centre Experience and Conditions**

Three participants expressed that the training needed to reflect what they faced in the contact centre. There appears to be a disconnect between training and actual work experiences for these participants. According to Singh (2013), millennials born between 1980 and 2000 believe workplaces do not offer enough autonomy and opportunity for self-development.

**“You were being babied** and being shown, this is what you do.” (P:6)

**“On the floor, it's something different;** they don't tell us what we really face when we're upstairs.” (P:17)

While the disconnect between training and the transition to work is expressed by only 15% of the sample, it points to an opportunity to provide a more tailored solution to training and readiness for work, based on each individual's level of speed to competence.

Ten participants (50%) expressed that they had a challenging contact centre experience. Of these, eight participants (40%) expressed that contact centre stress made the transition to work a challenge.

“When you get to the floor, to the actual employment phase, **it is pressure. I felt like crying one of these days.**” (P:6)

“**It is a bit stressful;** I'm learning to be independent and having bills and stuff to pay for.” (P:13)

One participant expressed that she felt insecure in her role when she observed her colleagues being dismissed.

“**The scary part is when you see people get dismissed** because of not performing that was like the scariest thing ever because you don't know when it can happen you.” (P:14)

The statement above echoes the fear and insecurity experienced, where the guarantee of employment is dependent on performance. Long shifts and verbally abusive customers also contributed to a negative experience at the contact centre. Two participants expressed that the long shifts were difficult.

“I decided to resign from that contact centre because of the long hours.” (P:17)

“It was an international contact centre with odd hours, and I lost weight. It was stressful.” (P:2)

Four participants indicated they experienced verbally abusive customers.

“It is a **tough job because you get to be sworn at** and called other names.” (P:8)

“I have to deal with some **customers that shout at me.**” (P:12)

The impact of a verbally abusive work environment on marginalised youth and identity development requires further investigation. Youth identity development occurs in the liminal space between the personal/micro- and the environmental/macro-divide (Adams & Marshall, 1996). The micro-aggressions and abuse that youth experience during their developmental and transition process could have negative implications for developing a positive social identity.

#### **6.3.5.5 Discussion of Main Theme 4: Appropriateness of Contact Centre Roles for Marginalised Youth (Exo-System)**

Early work experience influences young people's transitions from school to work. According to existing research, having work experience at an early age can help young adults establish themselves in the labour market later on (Baum & Ruhm, 2016; Howieson et al., 2012; Mortimer & Staff, 2004; Simpson et al., 2018).

Early employment can provide young people with essential skills, experiences and knowledge about the labour market (Baum & Ruhm 2016; Howieson et al., 2012) and improve basic interpersonal skills, which can increase their future employability (Howieson et al. 2012; Simpson et al., 2018). Early work experience can also positively affect future employers (Spence, 1978). Lastly, positive labour experiences during adolescence can increase self-esteem and a sense of mastery (Frøyland, 2016; Herrygers et al., 2017). Youth in the research study had mixed experiences of contact centre employment; while it provided a sense of belonging and connection to peers and mentors, it was also described by young employees as challenging, stressful and difficult. The level of coping in the contact centre environment is an increasing cause for concern, with negative terms such as 'electronic sweatshops' and 'factories of the

future' ascribed to such environments (Harry, 2015). The contact centre environment is recognised as being one of the world's most stressful work environments (Harry & Coetzee, 2011; Jacobs & Roodt, 2011). Contact centres present challenging working conditions that could aid youth development by developing resilience or they could hinder youth's positive identity development.

'Decent work' sums up the aspirations of people in their working lives. It involves work opportunities that are productive and deliver a fair income, security in the workplace and social protection for all; better prospects for personal development and social integration; freedom for people to express their concerns, organise and participate in the decisions that affect their lives; and equality of opportunity and treatment for all women and men.

The appropriateness of contact centres for marginalised youth is an important theme that emerged from the data, as the effect this has on marginalised youth needs further exploration. Within this type of work, as contact centre agents, performance is characterised by sensory overload, rapid technological, product and service changes, work pressure and high workloads (Swart, 2006). Younger workers seem to be more prone to experiencing burnout than older workers because, with increased age, people generally become more stable and mature (Bezuidenhout & Cilliers, 2010). Vaid (2009) calls for a review of current BPO practices and argues that overly ambitious performance targets and close monitoring are not sustainable. The author advocates for BPOs to take measures and build more sustainable practices that counter employee burnout.



Absenteeism, high turnover rates, constant monitoring and surveillance and the emotional labour required for the occupation are some of the key challenges that contact centre agents and managers face daily (Banks & Roodt, 2011; Borgogni et al., 2012; Consiglio et al., 2016; Poddar & Madupalli, 2012 as cited in Harry and Coetzee, 2013). Contact centre jobs are often equated to factory jobs or assembly lines based on the Tayloristic principles of job design; they lack skill variety and are often perceived as being repetitive (Borgogni et al., 2012; Harry & Coetzee, 2013). Similarly, Anantharaja (2009) found that lack of work variety and dislike of the nature of the job influence attrition rates.

Career adaptability is critical to enabling meta-competencies in a fast-paced and evolving work context (Hall & Mirvis, 1995; Savickas et al., 2009). According to Savickas (2012), career adaptability refers to attitudes, competencies, and behaviours that individuals adapt in order to fit themselves into the work that suits them. Similarly, career adaptability, according to Johnston (2018) is a psychosocial construct that includes readiness and resources for successfully facing vocational tasks, work transitions, and unexpected work challenges. Harry and Coetzee (2013), who were the first to investigate the construct of career adaptability in the contact centre environment, emphasised that enhancing contact centre agents' sense of meaningfulness by helping them to understand why the work is meaningful and where they fit into the broader picture, will significantly increase their levels of career adaptability. This in turn may result in more positive work attitudes and career wellbeing in the contact centre environment.

There needs to be more research regarding burnout in relation to years of service in the contact centre environment. Young people require encouraging spaces and opportunities to

engage and be active citizens (De Lannoy et al., 2015; Youth Lab & Poverty, Equality and Initiative, 2017). Occupational social workers could close the performance-burnout gap by offering workplace interventions that assist youth in coping with the stressful conditions that exist in the workplace. According to the study of Ballo et al. (2022), young people who lack the necessary training and experience to land a secure job are particularly vulnerable. The South African government has acknowledged the potential benefits that the development of a competitive and sustainable Business Process Outsourcing environment could produce. If appropriate workplace conditions and policy environments were established and practical actions implemented, the BPO sector could serve as an appropriate environment for first-time employees.

#### **6.3.6 Main Theme 5: Challenging Socio-Economic Conditions (The Macro-System)**

Bronfenbrenner's systems approach and concentric circles represent the felt experiences and dynamics at the youth interface. The outer circle or macro-system represents the socio-economic system that impinges on youth transitioning to employment. Three main sub-themes emerged from the data as socio-economic challenges faced by youth transitioning to employment. The sub-themes are 1) limited financial means, 2) transport and distance to work, and 3) the impact of the COVID-19 Pandemic. Each of the socio-economic sub-themes are discussed below.

##### **6.3.6.1 Sub-Theme: Limited Financial Means.**

Seven of the 20 (35%) participants expressed having limited financial means to function daily. The lack of financial means leads some participants to overspend and get into debt.

“You can’t afford to do things which are supposed to be afforded”. (P:8)

“I spend more than I make.” (P:6)

The cost of employment adds financial strain on youth and their families; this includes the cost of transport, food and clothing required to function in an organisational environment. Participants expressed that the flailing South African economic climate, with high inflation rates and the high cost of living, made access to the world of work challenging. According to Baldry (2019), it is the norm for young people to enrol in numerous education programmes, take various part-time and piece work opportunities and move households, with the common goal being to access better education and employment and, ultimately, to earn a decent living. In addition, youth are in family environments where the entire household is unemployed (P:5).

**“My mother lost her job, so it was very difficult”.**

Youth are expected to support their unemployed families, and the meagre starter salary is meant to stretch to help the young person establish themselves and assist wider households with the scourge of unemployment. The salary, albeit limited, is welcomed by youth, as participant five expressed:

“It's a good thing to have a salary; you are taking care of people with the little money you have. **All I was thinking about is just my salary at the end of the month**”. (P:3)

There is a deep sense of responsibility and pride in being able to care for loved ones. Marginalised youth are motivated by the home circumstances and conditions they experience to continue to earn and learn. Two participants expressed that they had no access to computers.

**“I came from a rural area in school there was no computer, no system, and everything you learn are from the hardcover textbooks”. (P:7)**

**“I didn't do anything that relates to computers”. (P.18)**

The financial limitation impacts marginalised youth's ability to manage the costs associated with employment; of significance is the high cost of daily transport, which puts added stress on young employees.

#### **6.3.6.2 Sub-Theme: Transport and Distance to Work**

Six out of 20 (30%) participants mentioned being challenged with transport and the distance to work. One participant stated that she was robbed travelling to work as she had to leave home at 5 am.

**“You have to take the taxi at 5 am so that you can be early, so for me staying in Ntuzuma, it's dark, and one time I got robbed”. (P:17)**

Participant five stated she had to ‘make other plans to get money for transport.’ Participant nine ‘borrowed money from my brother’, and P:10 expressed that she ‘borrowed money from my boyfriend’.

The distance to work is a further challenge, and in the case of participant five, it also presents physical danger where the participant was robbed of her personal possessions while travelling to work. Though employment and a salary open the door for youth to engage in the economy, they lack the supportive environment to fully participate in the economy without added strain and stress. This is aptly expressed by P:6,

**“There was no money for me actually to work.** You don't get paid when you first get employed. **So that means you have to support yourself** until you get paid. Transport for the first month is challenging as I do not live near town”. (P:6)

Finding employment is an additional cost marginalised youth must face; P:16 mentioned that he had to relocate to find employment.

**“Looking for a job costs more money than working.”** (P:16)

This quote from P:9 demonstrates the NEET experience with employment and the sheer frustration experienced in accessing limited low-paying jobs. Contact centres are cognisant of this fact, and there are measures put in place through contact centres to assist youth. Participant 10 is quoted as saying:

**“How was I going to be able to go to work? I couldn't afford food.** But at the contact centre, they gave us R30. My travel per day is R60, but the contact centre matched me halfway with R30”. (P:10)

Two participants mentioned receiving support from mentorships and social grants. There was a big shortfall between the cost of work and the stipend.

“I had to **borrow from my sister**, a varsity student, who got a stipend for transportation; I needed R1200 a month to be safe just for transportation”. (P:6)

“Just to survive on the social grant, it's very difficult”. (P:5)

While transport and distance to work present ongoing challenges for youth, the COVID-19 pandemic create new barriers to transition and made adjusting to work during the pandemic all the more challenging. The next section explored the impact that the COVID-19 pandemic had on youth transitioning to work.

### **6.3.6.3 Sub-Theme: Impact of the COVID-19 Pandemic**

Two participants expressed that Covid-19 made the transition to work a challenge.

“**It was very difficult at first because I started working when Covid-19 was in play. I started working, and then we had Covid.**” (P:3)

“**I feel that because of Covid and things like that, we need to have more space.**”

(P:14)

The Covid-19 pandemic also affected how participants felt about their workspace, with one participant mentioning that more space and better ventilation is needed in contact centres.

According to Taylor (2020), contact centres have been identified as having hazards from Heating, Ventilation, and Air Conditioning (HVAC) systems. Re-circulated air was widely

reported in previous studies as causing illness: ‘Air conditioning—it’s an incubator of germs’ (Taylor et al., 2003, p.446). In this typical workspace configuration, call handlers are potentially vulnerable.

The COVID-19 pandemic highlighted workplace safety concerns in contact centres. The combination of socio-economic challenges shows how broader macro-issues impinge on youth transition. These issues require multi-level ecosystem intervention from all stakeholders.

#### **6.3.6.4            Discussion of Theme Five: Challenging Socio-Economic Conditions (The Macro-System)**

Limited economic means despite employment emerged as a prominent theme. The cycle of poverty and challenging socio-economic conditions exists more than 25 years after democracy. Present-day African youth have been earmarked as the population group that will lift Africa out of the inter-generational poverty cycle and act as the demographic dividend that will ultimately change the economic conditions for many impoverished African families. The World Bank estimates that this demographic dividend or youth bulge could generate 11-15% GDP growth between 2011 and 2030 (Ahmed, 2015). The argument raised that a population increase of 70% in Africa, compared to the 16% that the world population will experience, comes with significant opportunities and benefits (The Brenthurst Foundation, 2011). Findings from this study indicate that financial gains and breaking the poverty cycle may not be realistically reached through low-paying entry-level roles offered by the contact centre environment. The gap between contact centre earnings and the financial needs of the youth population, appears too large. The apartheid system created inequality not only in terms of income and personal well-

being, but also in terms of other kinds of cultural and social capital progress for youth (De Lannoy et al. 2015).

Amongst the other socio-economic challenges identified in the study, transport to work also emerged as a significant challenge. The apartheid system of relocating black families to outlying areas far from the centre of employment opportunities has left scars that youth need to navigate, to access employment. A few employers offered transport assistance to employees with transport costs, but a more robust system of government transport support is needed to address the transport challenge. Attempts have been made through South African policy reform to address some of the consequences of apartheid (The Presidency, Republic of South Africa, 2015); the challenges, however, are deep-seated and require eco-systemic measures needed to get to a resolution. There has been recognition from South African government that the views and realities of youth must be taken into account when drafting policies and interventions (De Lannoy et al. 2015). Some key objectives in the latest youth policy (The Presidency, Republic of South Africa, 2015) include integrating youth development into mainstream policies, programmes, and national budgets and facilitating young people's smooth transition to independence. The current youth policy's objectives underscore the value of the research findings in this report as it could contribute to a better understanding of youth inclusivity and a smooth transition to independence.

Predictions for BPO growth are positive, with estimates valued at \$163 billion and expectations that this number could grow to \$183 billion by 2023 (Rajagopaul et al., 2020). BPO industry growth could impact the conditions and experiences of first-time employees should the



voices of youth be heard. This research study hopes to amplify youth voices and ensure that the transition challenges they experience are addressed.

## **6.4 Conclusion**

This chapter examined the intricate experiences of being-in the-workplace and transitions from unemployment to employment. The experiences of transition are complex, and the social circumstances of marginalised youth make the transition difficult for youth to navigate. The work of Heidegger assists in better understanding the felt experiences of youth and ‘becoming’.

By utilising a phenomenological analysis, the research findings revealed the hidden and, in some instances, not-so-hidden barriers to transition. The analysis also assisted in pointing out the existing bridges that exist in the way of peer support and team leader support.

Part one provided important contextual information, including youth demographic details, gender distribution, age range, educational qualifications, length of time employed, the number of contact centres that youth had been employed in, and lastly, an examination of organisation details. Part two explored the five main themes and subsequent sub-themes that emerged from the youth participants' narratives, illuminating how personal, organisational and socio-economic factors shape youth transition. These findings point to the need for multi-level interventions that focus on the systemic issues that prevent youth from experiencing successful, barrier-free transition to employment. The next chapter builds on the understanding of barriers and bridges that exist, with specific attention given to the conditions in workplaces that either aid or hinder youth transition to employment.

## **CHAPTER SEVEN**

### **Presentation of Organisation Findings**

#### **7.1 Introduction**

This chapter offers a qualitative and interpretive account of data collected from managers, human resource professionals, and BPO experts. Building upon the research methodology outlined in chapter five and the youth findings presented in chapter six, this chapter delves into the organisational findings on youth employment in the BPO sector. The first part is divided into two sections; part one outlines the demographic information of the represented organisation and its participants. The second part delves into the main themes and sub-themes derived from the data and provides a thorough analysis.

#### **7.2 Part One: Demographic Details of the Organisations Represented**

Five organisations were included in the final sample and included interviews with 12 participants from diverse BPO sectors, including finance, sales and service. The group consisted of four BPO experts, four human resource professionals, and four team leaders/supervisors. The five organisations had staff ranging from 500 to 1200 people. Three organisations focused on outsourcing as their core business, which entails providing business services to external clients (Lacity et al., 2011). One organisation focused on servicing internal clients, and one focused on providing training services to contact centres. The training provider was not a BPO service provider but instead supported the human resource department in running training programmes.

A diverse group of participants and organisations ensured that a broad range of perspectives and experiences were considered. Role-players from various functions in the BPO sector were included to examine issues related to the interface between youth and work. BPO experts provided a big picture of the industry, allowing for a macro-perspective on issues that affected youth. Whereas human resource professionals were able to address the challenges experienced in the hiring and training process of youth employment, team leaders were able to provide a perspective on the day-to-day experiences of youth.

An observation during the research process was that the different organisations did not have staff allocated to one role or function. For example, team leaders were also responsible for hiring, and some BPO Experts were involved in operational processes. The cross-functional structure in contact centres added to the rich and in-depth insights from research participants. It furthermore allowed the researcher to identify alignment or gaps in issues faced by the entry-level workforce in contact centres, thus improving the generalisability of findings.

### **7.2.1 Organisation and Participant Distribution**

The participants representing the employer component of the study had a diverse background and had a number of years of work experience in the contact centre industry. Table 9 details the role and years of experience that employer partners had.

**Table 9***Organisation and Participant Distribution*

| <b>Participant ID</b>                        | <b>Organisation ID</b> | <b>Current Role</b>                          | <b>No. of years' experience in the industry</b> |
|----------------------------------------------|------------------------|----------------------------------------------|-------------------------------------------------|
| <b>BPO Experts</b>                           |                        |                                              |                                                 |
| Participant 1 (P:1)                          | Organisation 1         | Manager: Digital Cluster                     | 10 years                                        |
| Participant 2 (P:2)                          | Organisation 2         | Chief Operating Officer                      | 16 years                                        |
| Participant 3 (P:3)                          | Organisation 3         | Learning and Development Manager             | 13 years                                        |
| Participant 4 (P:4)                          | Organisation 5         | Training and Development Specialist          | 20 years                                        |
| <b>Team Leaders/Managers</b>                 |                        |                                              |                                                 |
| Participant 5 (P:5)                          | Organisation 1         | Contact Centre Operations Manager            | 12 years                                        |
| Participant 6 (P:6)                          | Organisation 3         | Contact Centre Operations Managers           | 16 years                                        |
| Participant 7 (P:7)                          | Organisation 4         | Contact Centre Supervisor & Talent Recruiter | 17 years                                        |
| Participant 8 (P:8)                          | Organisation 2         | Contact Centre Team Leader                   | 3 years                                         |
| <b>Human Resource Personnel/Team Leaders</b> |                        |                                              |                                                 |

|                       |                |                                              |          |
|-----------------------|----------------|----------------------------------------------|----------|
| Participant 9 (P:9)   | Organisation 2 | Human Resources Manager                      | 16 years |
| Participant 10 (P:10) | Organisation 3 | Human Resources Manager                      | 17 years |
| Participant 11 (P:11) | Organisation 1 | Contact Centre Supervisor & Talent Recruiter | 5 years  |
| Participant 12 (P:12) | Organisation 1 | Contact Centre Supervisor & Talent Recruiter | 7 years  |

### **7.2.2 Analysis of Participant Demographic Details**

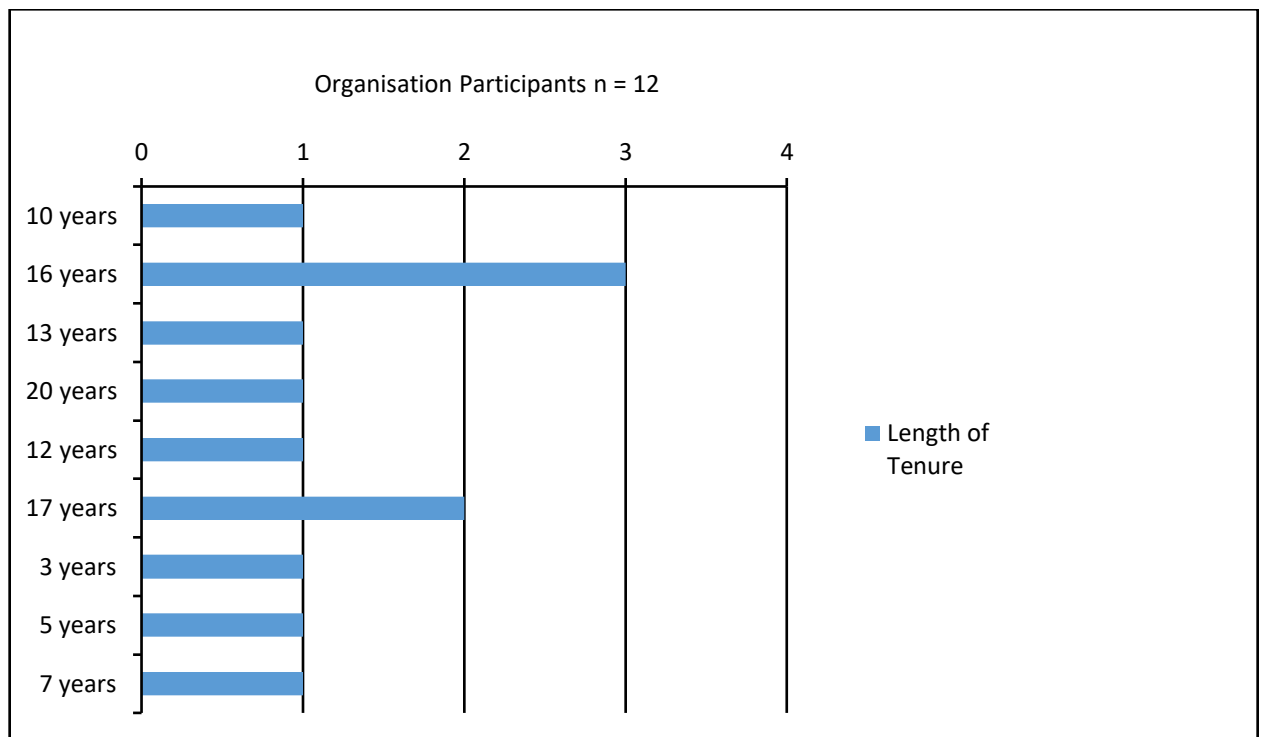
Analysing participants' demographic details contributed to a contextualised understanding of the diverse perspectives and nuanced views. Examining the years of experience was critical in comprehending the depth of insight participants had acquired in the field. Furthermore, scrutinising the functional role of each participant was vital in revealing the broad range of rich views that emerged from the research.

#### **7.2.2.1 Years of Experience in the Sector**

In analysing the demographic data of employer participants, 75% of participants had 10 years' experience in the BPO sector. The value of having this many experienced professionals in the study is that they contribute a longitudinal perspective. The remaining employer partners (25%) had 3-7 years of experience. This less experienced cohort is valuable in that they have less chance of historical bias.

**Figure 12**

*Duration of Participants Tenure*



The value of historical reference and time in the sector is evident in two excerpts.

According to P:6, the youth population has changed since he started working in the industry 16 years ago.

**“The youth I used to work with before, versus the entitled youth I work with now, is different.” (P:6)**

Participant three has seen a change in resilience in youth over the past 13 years that she has been in the BPO sector.

“If I had to say I worked with a group 8-10 years ago, they would fail, keep trying, and eventually get there. But **now I feel that if our youth do not get it the first time, they are more likely to throw in the towel.**” (P3)

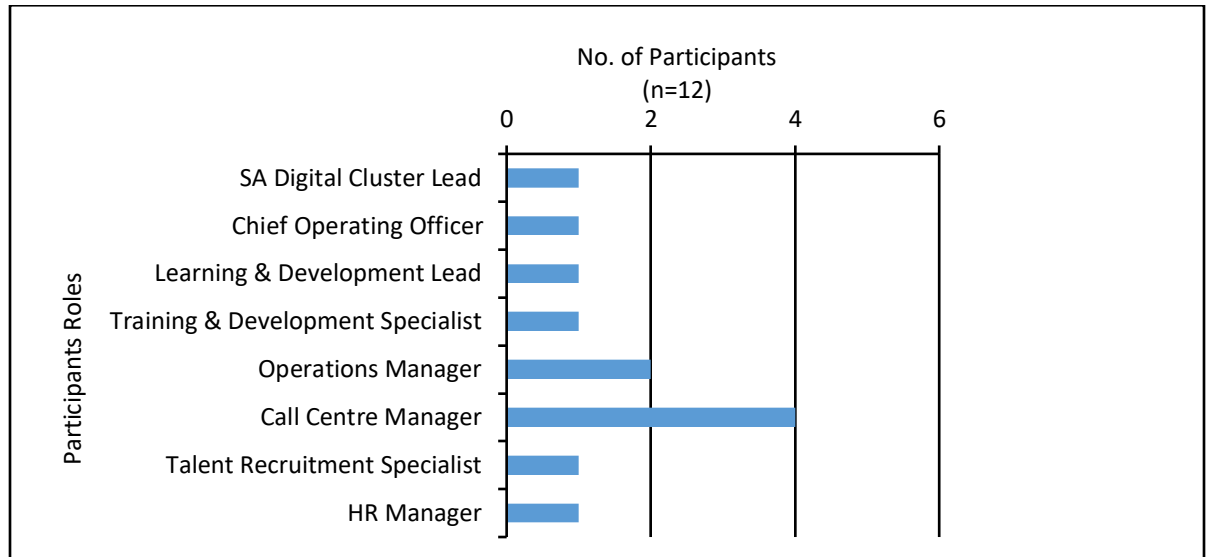
The statements from participant three and six point to changes and the evolution of views about youth employees over time. The value of years of experience that participants possessed provided valuable insights into the changes and trends in the sector. The years of experience were balanced with participants with less experience in the sector. Three participants had between three and seven years of experience, which allowed for a different, more current perspective of youth to be gleaned.

#### **7.2.2.2 The Functional Role of Participants in the Contact Centre**

The participants in the research study held various roles within the contact centre. Of the four BPO Experts, the first was a Manager for the Digital Cluster in her organisation, the second held the role of Chief Operating Officer, and the third was a Learning and Development Manager. The fourth BPO Expert was a Training and Development Specialist.

**Figure 13**

*Distribution of Organisation Participants*



The BPO experts shared valuable insights on BPO industry trends and the potential and challenges that the sector faces. The varied organisations and the nature of their various roles allowed for a nuanced and distinct view of the industry to be gleaned.

Participants shared observations and experiences on recruitment and organisational practices as well as on the culture and workplace environment. Participation across hierarchy levels and function areas provides a 360-degree view of factors that enable or hinder youth transitions.



### **7.3 Part Two: Overview of Selected Codes, Emergent Themes and Excerpts Utilising Bronfenbrenner's (1979) Bio-Ecological System**

The organisation data was organised using Bronfenbrenner's (1979) bio-ecological model, emphasising the interplay between the micro-, meso-, exo- and macro-dimensions of youth development. Bronfenbrenner (1979) considered social factors to be the most salient to the development of the human ecology, writing that the biggest concern for the healthy development of a child is the failure of the young person to be integrated into his society. In the context of youth transition to the work environment, the biggest concern for the healthy development of a youth employee is the failure of a young person to be integrated into the workplace.

Bronfenbrenner's work posits that individuals cannot be fully understood until the numerous relationships and contexts into which individuals are embedded are examined (Bronfenbrenner, 1979). The BPO sector has been identified by the South African government as a critical driver for economic growth and employment, with a number of initiatives (DTIC, 2013, 2005) introduced to compete with dominant players in the industry, such as India and the Philippines (Pandy & Rogerson, 2014). Understanding participants' views on the BPO sector can add to the body of BPO knowledge. The following section examines the main theme and sub-themes that emerged in the study of the BPO Sector.

**Table 10***Summary of the Main Organisation Themes and Sub-themes*

| <b>Macro-system</b>                                    | <b>Exo-system</b>                                                 |                                                         |                                      | <b>Micro-system</b>                        |
|--------------------------------------------------------|-------------------------------------------------------------------|---------------------------------------------------------|--------------------------------------|--------------------------------------------|
| Main Theme 1: BPO Sector Issues                        | Main Theme 2: Appropriate Work Environment for Marginalised Youth | Main Theme 3: Viability of Employing Marginalised Youth | Main Theme 4: Work Transition Stages | Main Theme 5: Team Leader qualities        |
| Sub-themes                                             | Sub-themes                                                        | Sub-themes                                              | Sub-themes                           | Sub-themes                                 |
| 1. BPO Sector to Improve Employee Value Proposition    | 1. The Contact Centre as a Work Environment                       | 1. Youth hungry for work                                | 1. Recruitment & Hiring              | 1. Communication and relationship-building |
| 2. High-pressure environment leading to high attrition | 2. Do Progression Opportunities Exist?                            | 2. Youth lack of workplace skills behaviours            | 2. Training & Development            | 2. Humility & service-oriented leadership  |
| 3.Sector Alignment Required                            | 3.Work Culture, Benefits and Rewards                              | 3.Youth require additional workplace support.           | 3.Onboarding & Induction             | 3. Empathy & Understanding                 |
| 4.Lack of team leaders/middle managers                 |                                                                   |                                                         |                                      |                                            |

### **7.3.1 Main Theme 1: Business Process Outsourcing (BPO) Sector Issues (Macro)**

This section relates to the broad issues participants raised about the BPO sector - it falls into Bronfenbrenner's macro-system. The main theme consists of four interrelated sub-themes, each discussed in turn. The first sub-theme that emerged was the need for the BPO sector to improve the employee value proposition.

#### **7.3.1.1 Sub-Theme: BPO Sector to Improve Employee Value Proposition for Youth**

Nine of the 12 (75%) participants were of the view that more could be done to improve the BPO employee value proposition. BPO sector growth depends on the industry's ability to scale its services rapidly. For the industry to thrive, it is crucial to draw in a global customer base and consistently attract suitable employees. According to Pawar et al. (2023), the Employee Value Proposition (EVP) represents the perceived overall deal between the employer and employee.

According to P:2 and P:3, more could be done to create awareness and get 'buy-in' on the career potential of the sector. Speaking on what youth may think of employment in the sector, participants stated the following:

"I'm a firm believer in positivity and creating an environment where people see the contact centre industry as a career, as opposed to a job." (P:2)

“Youth don't have any other option because they need a job, but **whether they buy into this job is questionable**. The contact centre could be the start of a career.” (P:3)

Sharing a positive narrative about potential benefits and growth opportunities that the BPO sector has, could attract more youth. Whether or not the BPO sector presents viable growth opportunities needs to be examined further. According to Bussin (2014), organisations are challenged by increasing difficulty in attracting and retaining the youth.

On the employer side, P:2 described that his organisation shared clips about youth's employee journey. The purpose of this is to demonstrate to potential clients the impact and difference that the work opportunity makes in young people's lives, and this, in turn, allows for client 'buy-in'. The use of multi-media to demonstrate impact could be extended to youth seeking entry into the sector. Employers could share video stories of growth and career progress to illustrate career success opportunities. This type of narrative exchange could increase the BPO Employer Value Proposition among young employees.

**“We do Net Promoter Score (NPS) dip checks with our new starters.** We do this on day one and at the two-week, six-week, and three-month marks.

“I started getting the guys to do video WhatsApp clips. I also utilise that for clients to say, this is what you get from investing in individuals from previously disadvantaged backgrounds. This allowed us to get more buy-in from clients.” (P:2)

Three participants (25%) shared the value of investing in, and developing inexperienced youth employees rather than only investing in experienced candidates. (P:5, P:7, P:9)

“I think that young people without prior experience, given the right environment, given the right tools and the right level of support, are way more than capable, and we have had lots of highlights and success stories from the centre to prove this.” (P:5)

Participant seven highlighted a preference for working with young employees as they could be strategically groomed into future leaders for the organisation's talent pipeline. Participant nine emphasised that there is a distorted perception among potential employees that contact centre work involves only short-term contracts. In contrast, his organisation values ensuring employees' safety and security through long-term contracts. Whilst length of contract is important, equally important is ensuring fair compensation with associated benefits (Tomlinson & Walker, 2012).

**“They think contact centre work is short term, but we look at the long term contracts like ten years later.** That is what we drive that kind of goal, that kind of vision. And it starts from day one.” (P:9)

While the sector has much potential, it does come with challenges that could affect employees' perceptions and work experience. The next section examines the reported high pressure and the impact that this may have on employee attrition.

### 7.3.1.2 Sub-theme: High-pressure environment leading to high attrition rate

According to Dobhal and Nigam (2018, p.3), attrition in contact centres refers to the “reduction in the number of employees through retirement, resignation or death and the number of employees a company must replace in a given time period to the average.” In an empirical study, Budhwar et al. (2009) showed that monotonous and stressful work can lead to high employee turnover. Six of the 12 (50%) participants agreed with Budhwar regarding the high attrition.

“There is **still a lot of attrition happening** in Global Business Services.” (P:1)

“We are constantly recruiting because of our attrition; we have this **constant staff turnover**- employees tend to job hop.” (P:10)

According to two participants, significant attrition happens in the first three to six months on the job. (P:5, P:10)

“The attrition and **drop off in that first kind of three to six months period** is generally where it is steepest.” (P:5)

“You get them to pass training to a point where they get the first salary payments, and then they are gone.” (P:10)

Two participants expressed that employees tend to leave to "job hop" between contact centres for higher pay (P:4, P:10). The high turnover leads to constant recruiting and high training and onboarding costs.

“Well, what I find is that many of the agents move amongst the different operators.”  
(P:4)

**“If you offered me R100 more, then it’s tickets, and then you take all your buddies with you, and you take your boyfriend with you and your girlfriend - so it's just this churn.”. (P:10)**

Participant 12 mentioned that some individuals desire higher compensation for their efforts in the workforce. However, the participant felt that new hires had unrealistic expectations about their salary.

**“People want more money for the work that they do. They also want unrealistic things because they have not worked before.” (P:12)**

According to (P:5), there has been a lack of initial investment and support structures for contact centre employees.

**“There's so much that could be done, if invested, from the beginning and with the right support structure. And it's weighing up, then, what does that cost look like versus the rolling attrition? If you can support someone to do their job well and stay there for a year, two or three years.” (P:5)**

Sengupta and Gupta (2012) conducted a study to investigate the impact of substandard jobs, lack of organisational support and a hostile organisational culture on the high attrition rates of employees. The study revealed that employees are likelier to leave their jobs if they feel that their work is not valued, or if they experience a lack of support from their organisation.

The issue of attrition is complex and has far-reaching consequence's; it requires ongoing attention and strategic research and practice efforts from multiple stakeholders. The important sub-themes of BPO sector alignment between the various industry bodies, entities and organisations are explored in the following section.

### **7.3.1.3 Sub-theme: Sector Alignment Required**

The BPO sector in South Africa is diverse, with complex dynamics between the various organisations, associations and regulatory bodies. Two participants (17%) highlighted that better alignment and collaboration in the BPO sector was needed, with 10 participants (80%) not mentioning this as an issue. According to P:2, the different objectives of the three regulatory bodies require alignment:

“There **is a lack of unity within our BPO industry**; there are three regulatory bodies, and I think each body has a different objective.” (P:2)

Participant one believed that BPOs would benefit from a collaborative and solution-oriented approach towards addressing issues within the sector.

“We have got to **bring all the parties to the table**. I think we need to have much more of the collective trying to problem solve rather than everybody running off on their tangent.” (P:1)

In addition to alignment, two participants raised concerns about the industry's readiness and ability to meet growth demands due to talent or capability issues. Participant Two recognised



that sector growth was imminent, but was of the view that the industry was not prepared for the growth.

“What my concern is that from an industry perspective, I think that **we are only 50%, at best, prepared** for the growth that's about to hit us.” (P:2)

“Are we there yet, in terms of saying that we are 100% confident that we're going to meet the growth needs, will we be able to sell it? No, **I don't think we're there.**” (P:3)

While two participants viewed the industry as not ready for scale, one disagreed with this notion and cited the BPO sector as well-equipped to meet the social capital needs of the growing industry.

“From a human capital perspective, **from an entry-level perspective, we are well positioned.** The sector's had enough opportunity to ready themselves for scale.” (P:1)

Three participants mentioned that the financial incentives received from the government gave contact centres a competitive advantage and allowed for more youth employment.

“**There are gains from the Skills Development programme,** where we get a rebate back, on training spend for learnerships. This is a sizeable amount back on your tax payment.” (P:3)

“So, **from a grant perspective, it makes a massive difference** to be able to land that opportunity in the country.” (P:2)

The South African government has prioritised investing in human capital programmes and job creation initiatives by spending approximately R135.9 billion in 2018. The government

has also encouraged organisations to hire young people by offering an employment tax incentive (ETI) (Ebrahim et al. 2019).

#### **7.3.1.4 Sub-theme: Lack of suitable team leaders and middle managers**

According to four participants, there is a shortage of skills and proper development for middle management roles in the industry (P1, P2, P4, P10).

“What I don't think any of us have solved for is the next level of management.” (P:1)

“But what we are already starting to **see play out in the industry is that saturation of that lower and middle tier management**. Promoted agents are not given the tools and the skill set to deliver the requirements, and that's a big portion of the risk in the industry, right-sizing itself for the future.” (P:2)

This finding concurs with Whitehead et al. (2023), who postulated that there was a need for not just entry-level positions, but also for capable team leaders, middle management, and executive roles. The opportunities raised by Whitehead et al. (2023) point to potential progression opportunities that youth could leverage if groomed adequately.

Participants two and four submitted that management roles are critical to maintaining quality but are limited in the BPO space. The lack of middle management raises the question of how quality international services can be maintained with a limited supply of middle managers. Contact centres, the industry governing body, have recognised the need to upskill middle managers and have instituted leadership development programmes. The BPO sector is being professionalised by developing a sector qualification linked to the University of Cape Town,

empowering aspiring middle managers with the skills needed to enhance their professional growth (Whitehead et al., 2023).

“The industry body has been running a **leadership development programme** through the University of Kwa-Zulu Natal.” (P:3)

“The Rising Stars programme is to develop employees ready to become a team leaders”.  
(P:10)

Leadership development programmes assist in building the pipeline of future team leaders. As the sector grows, qualified individuals can assist in ensuring contact centre quality. Experienced employees have a deep knowledge of the contact centre environment, are well-positioned to take leadership roles, and retain crucial institutional knowledge.

#### **7.3.1.5 Discussion of Main Theme 1: Business Process Outsourcing Sector**

Whitehead et al. (2023) posit that to find and retain young workers successfully, it is important to look for young people with potential and inform them of the potential career pathways available by entering into the global business services (GBS) sector. There is an opportunity for employers to create definable pathways for career growth within the sector. Research and practice attention must be paid to potential career pathways in the BPO sector and how this can be crafted into a viable employee value proposition. However, the high attrition does not currently point to the sector offering a viable employee value proposition.

Attrition in contact centres is a long-standing challenge and has recently received much research attention (Bhatnagar, 2007; Oshri, Kotlarsky & Wilcocks, 2015; Presbitero et al., 2016).

According to Batt et al. (2005, p. 349), contact centre attrition refers to losing contact centre agents due to factors such as resignation, termination, or transfers. It is measured as a rate denoting the percentage of contact centre employees who leave the organisation over a set time period." Sengupta (2011) and Sprigg and Jackson (2006) attribute the high attrition in contact centres to the stressful work environment. Brophy (2010) and Mulholland (2004) likewise concur that contact centre work involves low wages, high stress, precarious employment, strict management, draining emotional labour, and constant surveillance.

The views and descriptions of contact centre employment are changing, with the sector receiving much research and practice attention. Holtgrewe et al. (2002) however argues that a few aspects of contact centre operations have not been scrutinised by researchers. Burgess (2006) adds that the explosion of academic research on contact centres has matched the emergence and growth of the industry. Burgess points out that in 2006, a search on 'Google Scholar' unearthed around 39,000 articles that mentioned call centres. A similar search conducted by the researcher in 2024 yielded more than 60,500 articles. Academic and practice research has made advances, but it is unknown if the BPO sector has kept up with the academic recommendations and has effected these changes to benefit employees. Attracting a robust, talented and engaged workforce is key; however, the high attrition and job-hopping challenges mentioned by participants in this study point to the fragility of the workforce and the need for custom-designed, supportive workplace service (Anantharaja, 2009; Budhwar et al., 2009).

The South African government and industry players like BPESA play an essential role in promoting domestic and foreign investment in the sector and creating an enabling environment for youth employment (BPESA, 2018; Pandy & Rogerson, 2014). A strong contact centre

narrative and positive employee value proposition are needed for BPOs to be an employer of choice. Strategic collaborative efforts are required by all industry players to ensure that there is a streamlining of industry needs and challenges that match youth needs and expectations.

Research findings from this study show that youth are hungry for growth opportunities. Seventeen of the 20 youth participants (85%) had a positive, goal-oriented and hopeful outlook on work in contact centres. Eight youth participants (40%) were hungry to learn and grow. These findings show the opportunity for the industry to engage and attract a 'hungry' talented youth workforce. As employers strive to attract and retain high-value young employees, employers need to understand the expectations and needs that the youth bring to the labour market (Ng et al., 2010). Anwar and Graham (2019) state that it is important for the South African Government to consider the discrepancy between the positive perception of contact centre work that is purported by industry, and the challenging labour processes that occur on the ground for young employees. Creating investment conditions in the sector should be given the same priority as creating quality jobs and meaningful work conditions.

Employers should reconsider how they view young employees. Youth employees may not necessarily be the best fit for long-term contact centre employment, especially if promotion and growth opportunities are lacking. One idea could be to view youth employment as a short-term 12-24-month work period where youth are trained to meet employer targets and given credible opportunities within the contact centre. Clear career and growth pathways must be outlined for the contact centre to be a viable employer. Additionally, recognising the BPO environment as a temporary starting career could change the current attrition narrative that employers have; perhaps there needs to be an expectation that they should move on from an

entry-level role. Whitehead et al. (2023) posit that employees wishing to leave the industry gain skills in customer service, customer engagement and project management, which may set them up for success in many other sectors, including tourism, hospitality, and management consulting. By focusing on the valuable transferable skills that the sector offers, the value of employment in the sector can be promoted.

Viewing the BPO sector challenges through Bronfenbrenner's (1979) bio-ecological lens shows how factors at multiple levels influence youth transition. The BPO industry, workplace training and daily pressures all shape youth transitions at different ecological levels. This ecological perspective explains why addressing attrition and other transition-related challenges requires coordinated interventions across all system levels rather than isolated solutions. The next main theme examines the appropriateness of contact centre environments for marginalised youth.

### **7.3.2            Main Theme 2: Appropriate Work Environment for Marginalised Youth (Exo- System)**

The theme discussed whether the contact centre as a work environment was appropriate for marginalised youth. The research study views the youth work environment functions as the exo-system.. Lőrinc et al. (2020) expand on exo-systems by pointing out that exo-systems include government agencies, neighbourhood amenities and educational provision, the local labour market, transport and health services, and the media. Mills (2008) highlights the nature of interface issues in the workplace by noting that systems approaches consider the relationship between personal troubles an individual faces and how these troubles and experiences intersect with issues in greater society. The main goal of this study was to delve into the complex

relationship between youth and organisations and understand the dynamics at their interface. Therefore, it is crucial to carefully examine the work environment to identify the underlying factors that could potentially influence this interface.

#### **7.3.2.1 Sub-theme: The Contact Centre as a Work Environment**

Six participants (50%) agreed that the contact centre's high pressure and high delivery demands may not suit all youth.

“Although this may be an environment that has many opportunities, **this environment is not for everyone.**” (P:3)

These are **high-pressure environments with quick deadlines**, quick turnaround, and high demands, especially in international spaces and with young people coming in for the first time. It puts lots of pressure on leaders as well. (P:5)

According to P:5, the high-pressure work environment and compressed training timelines make it difficult for many young employees to cope with the contact centre as a work environment. Furthermore, P:5 points out the pressing commercial need for employees to be ready for work in the shortest possible time frame.

“And there's **a commercial need to get people out fairly quickly**. I think that could be brought into any training programme.” (P:5)

Since the environment is high pressure with tight deadlines, the suitability of this environment for young employees who may need more time to adapt may not necessarily be a good fit. There is scope for further research on how transition frameworks and youth-friendly

policies address the gaps between demanding work conditions and the capabilities of young hires. An important warning heeded by participant two was that the contact centre might create unintentional harm for marginalised youth.

**“When an individual is dismissed for poor performance. You have taken an individual from a previously disadvantaged environment, you have given them hope, and you have broken them, and you have brought them back to where they were. So now you created more harm to that particular individual.” (P:2)**

The comment from P:2 about creating ‘harm’ by exposing youth to high-stress environments must be taken very seriously by employers and professionals. The relationship between contact centre job demands and marginalised youth employees' ability to cope with these demands and employ existing coping resources, requires further investigation. Closer examination and research into the environmental effect of contact centre work on youth is needed. Apart from the high-performance environment that may make contact centres unsuitable, P:4 mentioned that some marginalised youth face additional psycho-social challenges.

**“Many of them are dealing with social issues. So, it's a costly affair to have a psychologist or a counsellor who can manage that sort of load.” (P:4)**

Targeted and bespoke supportive measures may be required for marginalised youth to cope successfully with the demands of contact centre employment. Three participants questioned whether contact centres provided meaningful employment.



**“Whether we are meeting the end objective of meaningful employment for that person, you know, whether that's fully realised, in the end, it is not determined.”**

(P:3)

A view raised by three participants was that youth who enter the contact centre environment get stuck and cannot find work opportunities elsewhere. Anwar and Graham (2019) point out that for South African youth, there are limited entry-level job openings in other fields and limited chances for advancement within contact centres; the authors point out that for South African contact centre employees, this may mean a plateau in their socio-economic status. This plateau could mean that marginalised youth get stuck in a cycle of poverty with limited opportunity to break out of the cycle.

“We see with people who have been in the role for many years - they started in 2014.

**They are here because they have nowhere else to go.”** (P:12)

“They got into the leadership programme because that's the steps you take to get to leadership, but *then you are stuck*.” (P:11)

The debate about whether or not contact centres offer a chance for career growth and advancement is outlined in the next section.

### **7.3.2.2 Sub-theme: Do Progression Opportunities Exist?**

Six out of the 12 participants (50%) mentioned "success stories" of employees progressing into team leader and management roles through talent development programmes (P1,

P5, P6, P7, P11, P12). The common view was that promising talent development initiatives were taking place in the contact centres, motivating employees to move into leadership roles.

“We see it in our space; **we have recently had five guys secure higher positions**, and they've all gone to QA positions. They will be team leaders soon.” (P:5)

“So, you want to grow in an environment - we have seen this in IT, **we have seen agents be promoted to managers.**” (P:6)

“I can give you **many success stories**; some agents are team leaders now, and some are moving on to other departments.” (P:7)

One participant shared how she had started working as an agent and has now progressed to a senior manager position.

“I worked as an administrator from 2014 until 2016 and **was promoted to team leader.**

“I have seen many people get their degrees while working in the Contact Centre.” (P:6)

The success stories and opportunities for growth mentioned by participants need more exposure and to be retold so that more youth can be attracted to the field. By underscoring the potential for success and growth in the BPO sector, young people could be encouraged to explore opportunities, potentially contributing to solving the attrition and the middle manager crises raised in the study.

Three participants mentioned specific programmes that assist youth to progress by creating pathways and opportunities for succession planning (P:6, P:9, P:10).

“Yes, through the Rising Stars programme, we've **seen a high success rate**, and most of our newly appointed seniors have come from the Rising Stars.” (P:10)

“They also tried to initiate a step-up programme for the guys to go into leadership roles and get the opportunity to be groomed.” (P:8)

According to P:9, better and more accessible ‘glide paths to growth’ must be developed.

“We must see how we can give some existing and potential new employees **a glide path to succession and development**”. (P:9)

Attractive youth-centric career development programmes are required in contact centres to retain employees. The onus is not only on BPO employers to better understand the components of an attractive youth-centric programme, but also on helping professionals such as occupational social workers who want to see youth leverage potential job opportunities in contact centres. The perception of limited career growth opportunities can undermine the attractiveness of the employee value proposition. Three participants in the study mentioned that youth get stuck in contact centres, meaning that limited growth opportunities exist.

“They have been in the role for many years, and **they are here because they have nowhere else to go**.” (P:12)

One participant shared her experience in the industry, where she had experienced slow progression opportunities and found upward mobility challenging to attain. While three participants (25%) were of the view that youth appear stuck, six participants (50%) were of the view that progression opportunities in contact centres exist. The youth findings of this study

show that 11 of the 20 youth (55%) reported feeling stuck in call centres. The issue of ‘being stuck’ and youth lacking the opportunity to advance their careers is an important consideration for employer’s intent on attracting and retaining an engaged youth workforce. The work culture described by organisation participants is discussed in the next section.

### **7.3.2.3 Sub-theme: Work Culture, Benefits, and Rewards**

Thite et al. (2014) conducted focused research on the role of human resource professionals within the (BPO) sector. The authors identified human resources as playing a crucial role as the guardian of culture, the builder of workforce and capabilities, the champion of processes, and the facilitator of employee development in BPO firms. While human resource professionals may be the ‘guardians of workplace culture’, all employees and employers must create a positive and affirming culture. Two participants expressed that it was essential to involve entry-level employees in creating processes, incentives, and events rather than dictating from the top-down.

“I would say use **entry-level team members as part of the processes and part of the building**. Having young people be a part of that creation and part of those processes is key - there is space for creativity, space for input, participation and engagement.” (P:5)

P:1 and P:5 agreed that there needed to be a focus on developing systems and environments that meet young people's needs. P:8 and P:10 mentioned that having a fun, vibrant work environment is highly valued, and employees want opportunities to socialise and be rewarded.

“Our contact centre is a **very vibey fun environment**; if you go onto our LinkedIn page, you will be able to see that there have been many activities.” (P:10)

P:8 mentioned that much effort was put into ensuring that the contact centre was a vibrant, enjoyable environment that appealed to younger employees.

“We are trying to bring a culture into the work environment so that **when the new guys are coming in, they are coming into something vibrant.**” (P:8)

Contact centres provide various initiatives like parties, competitions, prizes, and hangout spaces to drive engagement, motivation and celebration (P:1, P:6).

“We do a lot of *spot prizes and chill lounges where you get to socialise*. We also chat about how well you have done and just give space for acknowledgement and recognition.” (P:6)

“There is something about this organisation in that *they will announce and celebrate you like magic*; we celebrate small things, we announce you and celebrate you, no matter what you do or who you are.” (P:11)

Four participants (33%) highlighted the importance of rewards and recognition in the workplace. These were described as spot prizes and fun events. A fun, enjoyable environment and recognition of special days such as birthdays are important, but this must be balanced with a more meaningful reward system. More research is needed to understand the total benefits

package that could be offered to youth and how this contributes to better working conditions. One of the organisations in the present study mentioned that they offered funeral policy and medical aid benefits.

“Last year an **insurance was brought in as a funeral cover provider** where this benefit is cost to the company, and you are covered by our medical aid.” (P12)

All organisations (100%) in the present study mentioned that they subscribe to an external EAP provider, which is at a cost to the company. A more comprehensive rewards and recognition programme linked to career growth and compensation is needed. The literature indicates a positive correlation between reward systems and employee performance motivation (Pratheepkanth, 2011; Qureshi et al., 2010). In the following section, I delve deeper into the findings presented in this section and discuss the main themes in full.

#### **7.3.2.4 Discussion of Main Theme: Appropriateness of Contact Centres for Marginalised Youth**

The research questions that framed the organisation component of the study included understanding the views of BPO industry leaders, human resource professionals and supervisors/managers in working with unemployed youth. These professionals' views were important in better understanding interface issues that youth experience when transitioning to employment. The environment, as described from the BPO professionals' perspective, will shed light on BPO interventions that may be needed and can contribute to attracting youth to the sector.

Half of the employer participants (50%) reported direct experience of employees who advanced their careers within the contact centres. These significant accounts of growth are evidence of potential career paths in the sector. Three participants mentioned specific programmes that assist youth to progress by creating pathways and opportunities for succession planning (P:6, P:9, P:10). While these findings point to some progression opportunities, there is an alternate theme of youth being ‘stuck’ in contact centres. Half of the participants mentioned that they have examples of ‘successes and progression stories. Hannif et al. (2014) conducted a mixed-method study of 10 call centres in Australia. They concluded that more needs to be done to create coherent career paths and establish structured, accredited training programmes for call centre employees. Similarly, contact centre roles in South Africa have slow internal progression (Benner, 2006; Benner & Mane, 2011).

A South African study by Whitehead et al. (2023) showed that BPO executives believed that the sector did provide advancement opportunities, citing leadership opportunities within the industry but also advancement into alternate paths such as finance, accounting, legal, or transformation. In addition, opportunities exist in data science, software development, testing, and architecture. According to Sudan (2023), human resource practices in organisations need to adopt a more forward-looking approach and equip young workers with cross-job skills that enable them to perform new tasks.

Detailed research following the trajectory of youth progression in each field mentioned in the Whitehead et al. (2023) study needs to be researched and tracked. In addition, sector-wide research focused on tracking the number of progression opportunities that youth are given will

assist in understanding potential career pathing. A longitudinal view of the impact that working in a contact centre has on youth career advancement will assist in determining if the contact centre is an appropriate environment for marginalised youth, and whether or not it provides progression opportunities. Greater understanding around what quality and decent work look like in the contact centre setting is also needed. While career advancement is one yardstick to measure whether marginalised youth are suited to the BPO sector and experience growth, another more ‘globally’ accepted standard for evaluating the sector’s suitability is the concept of decent work. The following section looks at the BPO sector through the ILON’s lens of decent work.

The ILO first defined decent work as the “sum of people’s aspirations for opportunity and income; rights, voice and recognition; family stability and personal development; and fairness and gender equality” (ILO, 1999, p.3). Pereira et al. (2019) undertook a comprehensive literature review on decent work. The study analysed 38 studies in 17 sectors. None of these studies in Pereira et al. (2019) included a study of decent work in the contact centre environment. While employers appear to be doing much to grow the industry and human resource practice within the sector, empirical studies linked to decent work are not available to support these efforts. A body of work on what quality work means in the contact centre industry is lacking.

Given the sector growth and the lack of research on decent work standards in contact centres, there is an urgent need for professionals who are mandated to provide youth support to ensure that the sector's growth aligns with the needs of the youth. Occupational social workers should work towards protecting and advocating for quality, decent work opportunities for the



youth. The sector's growth should not be at the expense of the rights and fair working conditions for the young, unprotected workforce. According to Whitehead et al. (2023), the recent plan for growth developed by the GBS in South Africa lacks an emphasis on job quality. The authors caution that emphasising job creation and opportunity creation in GBS supply chains may result in poor working conditions and job quality. Furthermore, Anwar and Graham (2019) concur that there are no set standards that define the working environment of the contact centre.

Apart from career pathways and decent work, the culture of the organisation plays an important role in determining the suitability of the sector for marginalised youth. The organisation research findings show that culture was identified as a prominent theme. According to a study by Sengupta and Gupta (2012), a hostile organisational culture can lead to employees feeling undervalued and demotivated, ultimately resulting in high attrition rates. Similarly, Mathew et al. (2012) examined the influence of specific aspects of organisational culture, such as mission, concern for employees and trust, organisational learning, and employee empowerment. The authors found that organisational culture significantly impacts employee commitment towards the organisation. Another aspect of culture that featured as a sub-theme was rewards and recognition.

Recognition is either formal or informal programmes that acknowledge or give special attention to employee actions, efforts, behaviour or performance and support business strategy by reinforcing behaviours (World at Work, 2012). In this study, three participants (25%) highlighted the importance of a reward and recognition programme. The findings showed that formal

rewards and recognition for entry-level youth were lacking, and instead, an emphasis was given on token spot prizes and fun once-off events.

Bussin et al. (2019) conducted a comprehensive mixed-method study with 276 participants from seven of the nine provinces in South Africa. The study aimed to determine the changes and priorities organisations must consider for a total rewards framework to attract youth employees. The study found that seven core reward categories were found to affect youth attraction to organisations, including (1) leadership and environment, career development, security, flexibility and pay; (3) performance incentives (long- and short-term incentives, share options); (4) individual development, a safe and secure working environment; (5) work–life and resources (employee discounts, extended time off, tools to execute work, wellness); and (7) formal recognition and lump sum annual bonus payments. A comprehensive examination of the rewards present in contact centres is needed. A limitation of this study was that there were not detailed research questions focusing specifically on rewards. A rewards-focused study that examines reward frameworks and policy documents will yield more reward-specific data. While reward data did emerge from participants, a mixed-method study on reward experiences would be beneficial for understanding the relationship between rewards and work experience.

### **7.3.3 Main Theme 3: Viability of Employing Marginalised Youth**

This section explores BPO professionals' views on working with marginalised youth; the analysis considers the perspectives of BPO experts, human resource professionals, and team leaders/supervisors to provide a comprehensive view of the issue. The first sub-theme to be discussed was youth hunger and enthusiasm for work. Subsequent themes will include the lack

of youth workplace skills and behaviours that the youth demonstrated and the required work readiness and additional support.

#### **7.3.3.1 Sub-theme: Youth are Hungry for Work**

Six of the 12 (50%) participants mentioned that they experienced marginalised youth as hungry for work opportunities. Three of these participants mentioned that poor economic conditions drove the rationale for the hunger.

**“I have seen a hunger from individuals to work and grow and progress.” (P:5)**

Participant two concurs that there was a difference between employing marginalised youth and ‘privileged’ youth. Inexperienced youth from disadvantaged backgrounds appear highly motivated and eager to learn.

“Because you have individuals that have come from an environment that has not been lavish, the expectations are not as high as those individuals from the upper markets, the university graduates.

**The candidates from previously disadvantaged backgrounds have one dream only: to be able to provide for their families.” (P:9)**

Young people who have not been in the job market for a long time see more value in a job than individuals with many choices. Unfortunately, the poor chances of upward economic

mobility leave young people with few choices. The upside is that employers have a group of young people who are appreciative of, and hungry for, work (Youmans et al., 2023).

**“So, they are all really very appreciative of the work.” (P:4)**

**“For the most part, you know, just lots of willingness and eagerness to learn.” (P:5)**

Apart from an appreciative, hungry workforce, participant 12 mentioned that some marginalised youth are disciplined and diligent about their work. She explained that their employees have a two-week onsite and two-week work-from-home schedule. She found that even during the work-from-home schedule, marginalised youth would come to work if they were affected by electricity outages in their area.

**“But there are people who see that load-shedding is national, and they come onsite until it is called off because they do not want their work to be affected.” (P:12)**

Load-shedding is a South African phenomenon where electricity supply is limited. The manager in the above excerpt refers to employees who have ‘work-from-home’ contracts and choose to work in the office when there is load-shedding, unlike some employees who seem to use load-shedding to disengage from work. The findings indicate that inexperience does not necessarily equal a lack of motivation and engagement (P:2; P:4; P:5). Employers can leverage the optimism and eagerness displayed by inexperienced youth and mould them into high-performing, motivated employees (P:4; P:5). Though important, enthusiasm and hunger for work are not the only factors to consider when examining the viability of employing youth. Having the skills and behaviours to do the work must match the enthusiasm. Participant six believed that the

quality of youth entering the job market presently is significantly lower than when the participant began work in contact centres 16 years ago. He did not share the sentiment that youth are hungry for work.

**“I'm going to be really frank, it's sad, from what we used to receive to what I see now, that's very sad. (P6)**

Furthermore, P:6 mentioned a sense of resignation and frustration since he felt it was hard to get through to youth as they did not seem to care about the consequences of their actions and exhibited a nonchalant attitude. According to Twenge et al. (2012), each generation exhibits different work values, preferences, and characteristics. For supervisors and managers who have been in the industry for a long period, adapting to the changing preferences and values that youth exhibit will require awareness and effort. Change in the workplace needs to happen on both the employee's and the employer's end.

**“They do what they want, when they want and come what may doesn't matter.”**  
(P:6)

The industry benefits from employing young employees, as the higher retention rate of those without experience who see the opportunity versus skilled employees looking to move to more lucrative positions.

**“And it's weighing up, then, what does the cost of training youth employees look like versus just this rolling attrition of experienced employees.” (P:5)**

Participant nine was of the view that marginalised youth have higher tenure than more mature or older employees.

“Historically and via analytics, we have seen that experienced people don't stay long in our business only because they want more.

But when we take people through the training programme, and bring people from disadvantaged backgrounds, who don't have the experience they tend to stay longer.” (P:9)

#### **7.3.3.2 Sub-theme: Youth lack workplace skills and behaviours**

All 12 employer participants (100%) believed marginalised youth lack workplace skills. Some participants attributed the lack of skills to the South African education system, noting that youth are not sufficiently developed.

“For a young person entering the workplace for the first time with very limited work experience, **there is a need for some digital literacy components.**” (P:5)

“Some of them could not even press a computer to switch it on.” (P:11)

Three participants (P:2; P:4; P:5) identified three main skill gaps: digital skills, typing skills, and language skills. South African youth can learn these skills, but need to practice agency and take ownership of the skills gaps. Agency refers to a personal sense of responsibility for your career growth including influencing people, events and circumstances for the better (OECD report; 2018). Unfortunately, since the South African education system does not meet the education needs of the workplace and youth, youth need to take ownership of their careers by

practising agency in their learning, which could open doors for work opportunities. Participants two and five point out there is a need for digital literacy, typing skills and communication skills that can be learned.

**“So typing is a key element** on top of the accent neutralisation it would be the typing piece **and then comprehension and understanding in terms of listening skills** would be the last element.” (P:2)

Apart from the core skills that young people need to enter the workplace, four participants highlighted the importance of gaining experience in understanding workplace expectations and norms.

“They were not fully equipped for what to expect when entering the workplace.” (P:3)

“Learning and development programmes for young people entering the workplace **should include behaviours and socialisation for work.**” (P:5)

Work socialisation challenges range from the way in which young people present themselves through their dress code to their language and the understanding of what it takes to succeed in a workplace. Young people who have not been exposed to the modern workplace and who don’t have role models, require assistance learning workplace norms. Four participants have highlighted work attendance and absenteeism as challenges among young employees where workplace norms are not followed.

“You know, it's something we're speaking about right now; **we are facing a high percentage of absenteeism.**” (P:8)

**“Attendance is just out the window sometimes because they do not know what it is like to be responsible for having that long-term commitment.” (P:9)**

Five participants believed that youth who have challenges adjusting to the workplace and lack understanding of workplace norms are in this position since they lack exposure to the workplace. The underlying narrative from the data was that more exposure to what is needed in the Contact Centre environment would give youth a better chance of transitioning.

**“It has been around the lack of exposure that they have had to different environments, different platforms, different opportunities” (P:2)**

**“Because I think it's more about how to give them exposure and give them the experience and set those expectations. (P:5)**

While some participants agreed that environmental exposure is needed, at least six participants (50%) believed that the challenge in employing marginalised youth also had to do with some core attitudes incompatible with workplace success. Six participants expressed that some youth have a sense of entitlement and expect ‘instant gratification’ without necessarily putting in the work and the effort. Addressing the skills gap and providing exposure to the work environment may be easier than dealing with ingrained attitudes towards work. According to participants (P:6; P:7; P:9; P:10; P:12), this sense of entitlement contributes to the lack of commitment and the high turnover. According to Berlin et al. (2010), a delay in youth entering adulthood due to long-term unemployment could inadvertently create a sense of entitlement and a lingering pattern of dependency. The link between youth entitlement and long-term unemployment requires further research.



According to De Hauw and De Vos (2010), young people starting their careers are highly motivated, prioritise organisational training and growth opportunities, and seek out fulfilling and personally meaningful work. Supervisors who have been in the field for a longer time could view the expectations of the current workforce as a sense of entitlement. Work on closing the gap in understanding for supervisors and managers to better understand a youth workforce may be needed.

**“The number one challenge that I find is youth want instant gratification.** So, they are not necessarily geared up for the long haul. They want to see things happen quickly.” (P:3)

**“It's more about they feel entitled,** and it's not so much about wanting to work towards achieving at work. It's just that they feel they want to walk in and get everything given to them on a silver plate, and unfortunately, it doesn't work.” (P:10)

Participant six, with 16 years of experience in the industry, and participant seven, who had 17 years of experience, note a change in youth attitudes over time. They share the view that the current generation is more entitled than the youth the participants have worked with.

#### **7.3.3.2.1      *Entitlement***

Six of the 12 (50%) participants stated that young employees exhibited a strong sense of entitlement.

**“It's just that they feel as though they want to walk in and get everything** given to them on a silver plate and unfortunately, it doesn't work.” (P:10)

**“I think it is more the entitlement** of the newer generations.” (P:7)

Youth entitlement is a dominant theme in the data. Understanding where and why the sense of entitlement comes from requires further research. For instance, the current generation of youth has greater access to digital technologies, such as immediate access to information, entertainment, and communication; whether or not this has made youth more accustomed to getting anything they want rapidly with little effort requires further investigation. Not enough is known currently to determine whether or not a link between digital access and entitlement exists.

Generalisations about a generation or group of young people must be entered into with caution; it is dangerous to paint broad brushes on a generation; perhaps it is advisable to view the issues of entitlement perhaps as they arise in each individual.

While six participants viewed youth as entitled, six viewed youth as hungry to work. A balanced view of youth that avoids generational stereotyping may be needed. Managers and supervisors who have been in a role for several years may romanticise the past. Supervisors may be influenced by recency bias. Turvey and Freeman (2012) define the recency effect as “a cognitive bias where people remember more clearly the most recent items, ideas, or arguments they encounter rather than earlier ones” (p. 45).

Participant nine, provided an alternative view of the issue of entitlement. She was of the view that entitlement showed itself in a handful of employees and that it was ‘just a people’ issue rather than a youth issue.

“You also get that handful of people that pull up the cards with us now, and again, **the entitlement comes down, and they question everything.** (P:9)

Notwithstanding, the ‘sense of entitlement’ was mentioned frequently, with words and phrases like "entitled," "entitlement," and "want things given to them on a silver plate," being raised by participants throughout the interview. There was an underlying view that youth don’t have the long-term commitment to endure and stay the course in a contact centre. Phrases like "not geared up for the long haul," "want to see things happen quickly," and "not getting it the first time they are more likely to throw in the towel", characterise this sentiment.

One participant highlighted that long-term commitment issues in contact centres can be attributed to a collective or "group mentality". This is considered a factor contributing to high turnover rates and the reluctance to hire young employees in this industry.

“**The other is probably a group mentality.** So very much follow my friends and my peers, not seeing as much individual decision-making, **people will just go with the crowd,** wanting to fit in with the crowd.” (P:3)

To sum up, the excerpts above focus on the notion that younger generations possess a heightened sense of entitlement, lower levels of perseverance, and a tendency to conform to peer pressure instead of demonstrating independent decision-making.

The reality of the historical background that disadvantaged youth come from is that open doors to exposure don’t exist. Many young individuals seeking career guidance may not get

advice from their close circle due to their community's prevalent low-wage jobs and high unemployment rates (Baldry et al., 2019). Therefore, addressing the need for young people to understand contact centre work comprehensively through initiatives, such as contact centre road shows, open days, or digital work experiences, is crucial. These creative exposure experiences could unlock the untapped potential of the youth in South Africa, as traditional schooling does not always provide adequate employability skills.

**“They are not sufficiently equipped** to stick into the work environment. If school leavers don't have the basics of what is required in an education system, **it's very difficult for the employer and the private sector to fill that gap**. Yeah. And give the new recruits what the school and education system should have provided them with?”

(P:4)

“Education has suffered a lot. And **we do not put enough emphasis on the education** system. So, it's okay for us to pass people at 30% and 40%.” (P:6)

According to three participants, private-sector employers face a daunting task due to the education system's shortcomings. Bridging the skills behavioural gaps will require more than just partnerships - an ecosystem approach is needed to tackle this challenge. Participant one highlighted her organisation's ecosystem approach to address the employment crisis.

“We're crafting an ecosystem model that takes a collaboration between government, the private sector and the social partners, and says if we want to do something differently, we've got to do it together.” (P:1)

### **7.3.3.3 Sub-theme: Youth Require Additional Workplace Support**

Employing marginalised youth requires additional support from employers. There is a need to balance the growth of the sector and the need to fill positions with the cost of upskilling youth, which can be an ongoing effort. Various forms of support are necessary, ranging from enhancing work readiness and bridging the skills gap, to providing psycho-social assistance to address the mental health challenges faced by the youth and tackle practical issues about employment costs and transportation. The following section delves into the participants' opinions regarding the required workplace support.

#### **7.3.3.3.1 *Employee Assistance Programme***

All participants (100%) mentioned an Employer Assistance Programme. This was considered much needed by several participants, given the serious nature of the mental health and social issues that marginalised youth face. However, it is important to note that no participants in the present study knew, of or understood, the role of an occupational social worker. The concept was unknown to them, but they identified with social work or psychological support through the EAP. According to P:2, there is great potential for support services to support the recruitment and transition of youth to employment.

**“The support services, from a psychological perspective, are underutilised in the industry’ (P:2)**

According to five participants (P:12, P:11, P:9, P7, P:8), marginalised youth face issues such as drug abuse, dealing with trauma/abuse, the effects of COVID-19 and mental health issues like anxiety, depression and even suicidal tendencies. Similarly, De Lannoy et al. (2018)

found that participants in their study spoke of experiencing either use of substances in their home or of using substances themselves.

“I definitely think that **there is a need for support**. COVID has brought mental health problems to the fore.” (P:1)

“It has become quite a common thing where **they cannot cope and they get stressed, and then it is anxiety attacks and depression** and all these kinds of mental illnesses.” (P:7)

From the excerpts above, it is clear from a number of participants that hiring inexperienced youth comes with managing many complex mental and social issues. These findings concur with De Lannoy et al.’s (2018) review of youth needs, which similarly found that young people in their study all faced traumatic experiences while growing up and mentioned that they have experienced or witnessed, violent crimes such as rape and assault, or have lost close family members to violent crime.

Whilst employers provide mental health support; the findings revealed that the current mental health support is not only inadequate, but also not fully utilised. According to Dimoff and Kelloway (2017), if mental health resources are not available or are under-utilised, employee mental health may deteriorate and leave an impact that reaches far beyond the individual employee level. A youth workforce requires specialised employee health services run by service providers with a nuanced view of the industry and specialised training in youth issues.

“So, with the operators that I have been involved with, they are EAP services, but **I have found that the agents do not access them.**” (P:4)

“**I do not think it is fully utilised.** I think people are not necessarily totally open to just making that call. We have usage data, and it's not that high; there it's **quite minimal use of the EAP.**” (P:3)

The under-utilisation of EAP services leaves vulnerable youth with serious mental health issues in a position precarious, unsupported position, where they experience multiple stressors from work, community and on the home front. De Lannoy et al (2018) similarly found that few, if any, of the participants knew about, or had managed to access, psycho-social support to help them cope with these experiences. This speaks to a dearth of mental health support services in local communities, particularly poor communities where the burden of crime and violence is so much higher. Exploring the rationale for the low usage of services in communities and organisations requires urgent attention from service providers and employers.

Some of the reasons cited by participants (P:8, P:9) for the under usage of the EAP services range from cultural issues with counselling, to a lack of awareness of the services. Participant nine mentioned cultural differences that some African people face when seeking help. According to this participant, individuals in the African culture do not seek help from ‘strangers’.

“I think it comes from the culture as Africans; we are not always exposed to these kinds of helps - those things were not part of how you grew up. **Why would I call someone I do not know and tell him my troubles?** What does he know about me?” (P:8)

Participant nine mentioned that youth employees may be afraid to seek support due to uncertainty around the type of support they will receive and concerns regarding confidentiality. Participants shared this view by stating that some individuals avoid support services because they prefer 'privacy'.

The cultural stigma around mental health support makes participants feel uncomfortable, uncertain, and perhaps even ashamed of accessing services. According to four participants, much is being done to drive awareness and usage of the EAP services. Participant nine mentioned several initiatives to drive engagement. They also invite EAP service providers to special events where employees can meet with them directly.

**“We have posters all over, and we are launching an intranet now to showcase the service. We also invite the EAP service providers to our special days. So, employees can meet with them directly.” (P:9)**

According to P:3, more experienced individuals who have been in the contact centre longer tend to use the EAP services, more so than new employees.

**“So, where people have been in the business longer, they tend to use the EAP service more than the new starters.” (P:3)**

According to three participants, they have directly referred employees to the EAP, though there is a preference for employees to use the service on their own.



**“We make manager referrals to the psychologist, but sometimes you want them to take the initiative?”** (P:12)

Some organisations are taking the under-utilisation of EAP services seriously. Participant 12 stated that they had decided to change EAP service providers when they realised that individuals were not utilising the psychology sessions as much as they would have hoped.

**“We found that people were not using the EAP service provided by the company, so we decided to change the service provider.”** (P:12)

Certain employers offer practical aid to their staff along with mental health assistance. According to three participants, these organisations take note of the social hurdles young employees face and strive to help them overcome these obstacles.

#### **7.3.3.3.2      *Practical Support***

It is not only the cost of transport that require youth to receive assistance but also the experience of crime when travelling to work. Two participants mentioned that secure transportation for employees is one of the support measures provided by these companies. (P:3; P:8)

A review of 12 South African youth studies (De Lannoy et al., 2018) showed that most youth in all 12 studies experienced exposure to crime daily. Findings from this research study highlight the experience with crime and travel to work.

**“She has to take three taxis to get here.** Now, she is getting up at 4.30 am to get to work; it is impossible for her to be in your environment because she has had such a long day before she even gets to work. And **it is dangerous.**” (P:3)

**“Living in a country with a high crime rate.** So, we will take the person from the company's doorsteps to the doorsteps of their houses.” (P:8)

Two of the four organisations also assist with a reduced daily meal cost for all employees.

“We understand that not everyone has funds available for food for travelling and those types of things. So, **we give you a stipend daily**, which is cash for your transport costs, and we give you a meal daily.” (P:6)

Support structures like stipends, meals, transport, etc., are highlighted as necessary, especially when hiring disadvantaged youth who may lack resources. Participants two, five and six - highlighted support structures like stipends and meals as necessary for disadvantaged youth access. From the excerpts and findings, it is seen that empathic leaders can nurture young employees' confidence, capacity and work readiness by investing time in active coaching and skills development, addressing basic needs through stipends, and facilitating access to ancillary services.

#### **7.3.3.3.3      *Innovative Wellness Strategies***

Three of the 12 (25%) participants mentioned wellness strategies that they employed in their organisations. The interview excerpts highlight the implementation of informal initiatives to support young employees' well-being within high-pressure contact centre environments.

**“We arrange breather sessions.** When we close the lines for 30 minutes, give everyone a break, and **we then talk about how we can better cope.** We will focus on personal mastery for 30 minutes. We also cover learnings, for example, ‘What have you learnt this week?’” (P:12)

As P:12 described, their organisation allows employees to openly discuss challenges and coping strategies. Research shows that such respite opportunities enhance the ability to manage stress and sustain performance in demanding roles (McGarrigle & Walsh, 2011).

Additionally, P:11 mentioned leveraging an organisation's radio station, where broadcasts are made to celebrate employees and share company news. This drives a sense of community and recognition, which literature suggests strengthens commitment and morale.

**“We have an organisation radio station where people are celebrated, and news is shared.”** (P:11)

Participant five also mentioned an innovative digital coach chatbot that delivers personalised guidance on well-being. This is a great example of using technology to provide scalable well-being support.

“I have been **working with a teammate to develop a chatbot product called ‘coach. me’** Essentially, this is a habit formation, goal-setting wellness app.” (P:5)

#### **7.3.3.4 Discussion of Main Theme: Viability of Employing Marginalised Youth**

The study by Graham et al. (2019a) highlights the resilience many youths possess to better their lives through various means and their willingness to do almost any work or course that they are offered in order to upskill themselves. This is on condition that they can cover their basic living expenses.

Suttil (2021) is of the view that NEET young people are stereotyped and that blame for their individual circumstances is apportioned to them rather than examining the complex interplay of social issues that impinge on their life circumstances. The negative discourse around NEETs’ in policies and programmes must be combatted with alternative narratives promoting broader ideas of progress and success (Suttil, 2021). This research study contributes to changing the negative perception of youth employees by giving a voice to youth and contributing to a positive and more realistic narrative about issues at the youth/organisation interface.

Entitlement and what it means in relation to marginalised youth needs more research attention. Are ambition and hunger for work masked as entitlements? Entitlement is defined as a “pervasive sense that one deserves more and is entitled to more than others” (Campbell et al. 2004, p.31). According to Twenge and Campbell (2009), a sense of entitlement has increased almost six-fold over the last decade, from 148 mentions in 1998 to 863 mentions in 2008 in a

database review. The author's empirical study found that higher levels of non-exploitive entitlement is based on the perception that one deserves, or has a legitimate right to, positive outcomes is not necessarily a negative quality. Youth may have a surer sense of self, an unapologetic desire to succeed and a view that they deserve success. A better understanding of entitlement's specific attributes or behaviours is needed. Lessard et al. (2011) point to a more balanced view of entitlement, arguing that not all feelings of entitlement are bad.

An examination of employees' transition to employment according to four main work transitions stages will be presented in the next section. Understanding employee transition through these stages provides the nuanced view of experiences, which is central to the aims of this study. The proposed stages are 1) the recruitment and hiring phase, 2) the training and development phase, and 3) the onboarding and 4) employment stage.

#### **7.3.4 Main Theme 4: Work Transition Stages: Exo-System**

Four main work transition stages are discussed below. These include recruitment and hiring, training and development, onboarding and induction and, lastly, the beginning of work stage.

##### **7.3.4.1 Sub-Theme: Work Transition Stages – Stage 1: Recruitment and Hiring**

Four out of 12 participants (P:2; P:5; P:9; P:12) suggested that the recruitment process for youth employees needs adjustment. According to P:5, interview questions should be adapted to be more accessible for inexperienced candidates. Participant nine, shared that her organisation

adjusted the minimum application criteria since they sourced staff directly from disadvantaged communities.

“If need be, **we would adjust the minimum criteria** and prerequisites for that particular recruitment drive.” (P:9)

Participant nine, proposed that BPOs take a more comprehensive approach through leveraging the expertise of professionals, such as behavioural psychologists and industrial psychologists since he was of the view that the assessments were too simplistic.

“We have fallen victim to a simplistic psychometric checklist box through an online platform or different assessments. **We could leverage off the likes of behavioural psychologists and industrial psychologists** and assessment practices.” (P:2)

According to P:5, the interview process with marginalised youth was encouraging since young people were enthusiastic and grateful for the opportunity to be recognised and interviewed.

“And so, I saw a lot of young people, but **they were just so thankful actually to even have an interview** and to be able to have a conversation.” (P:5)

The comment from P:5 about the young people she interviewed being grateful for conversation points to the ‘feeling of exclusion’ or marginalisation that youth may feel while job-seeking and trying to find their way into the formal economy. For the interviewer, the interview may be a simple ‘organisational practice’; for the young job seeker, the interview stage

is a symbol of recognition and acknowledgement of the value a young person may add to the workplace.

Mowat (2015) points to the experience of marginalisation as a sense of being undervalued and excluded from a community or social group. The start of a new job following a successful interview gives ‘excluded youth’ a sense of belonging to a new social group. McAdams et al. (2006) pose that the work environment is crucial in shaping identity and could help youth answer two identity questions: “Who am I?” and “What is my place in this world?” P:4 pointed to the ‘disillusionment’ of young job seekers, which makes answering the identity questions posed by McAdams et al. (2006) more complex.

“They have spent a few years job seeking and are often disillusioned, and **they find the process of seeking employment very trying very challenging**; they often are not well equipped to handle it from a skills perspective, but also from a practical perspective.”

(P:4)

To better understand the sense of disillusionment that youth may experience, recruiters and talent acquisition specialists require a cultural sensitivity to the NEET youth experience. Ensuring that the interview is a gateway rather than a barrier to employment will require intentionality by employers. Occupational social workers could contribute to addressing the ‘gap in recruitment’ for youth and employers by offering human resource professionals and recruiters training in ‘youth/unemployment focused sensitivity or cultural competence programmes’. The next section highlights innovative recruitment and hiring practices reported in the study.

#### **7.3.4.1.1      *Innovative Recruitment and Hiring Practices***

Two participants described that their organisation sourced youth from disadvantaged communities close to the contact centre; this practice is known as impact sourcing. According to Lacity et al. (2012), impact sourcing is an emerging phenomenon that aims to transform people's lives, families, and communities through meaningful employment in the Business Process Outsourcing (BPO) sectors. The Monitor Group/Rockefeller Foundation (2011 p.2) define impact sourcing as “employing people at the bottom of the base of the pyramid, with limited opportunity for sustainable employment, as principal workers in business process outsourcing (BPO) centres to provide high-quality, information-based services to domestic and international clients.” Participant two described that his organisation targeted high-performing youth in local township schools who could not get into university but who demonstrated high potential in their high school performance.

“I got my recruitment team to go out to the best-performing schools in the township areas. **And I got a list of those candidates that passed and have not been able to get placement into university** for whatever reason.” (P:2)

According to P:5, the contact centre she represented focused on inclusive hiring of disadvantaged youth.

What I appreciated about the interview process is that it very much targeted young people excluded from the formal economy's labour market. So, there was a huge focus on impact sourcing and inclusivity.” (P:5)



Participant nine mentioned that the organisation she represented participated in a ‘Street to Seat’ recruitment drive. This is a form of advertising via online platforms combined with community outreach and partnerships targeted specifically for marginalised youth. Participant 12 mentioned that her organisation participated in an impact sourcing programme called ‘Feet on the Street’.

**“Doing feet on the street**, a programme where organisations run campaigns in communities to attract disadvantaged youth.” (P:12)

In addition, two participants from one organisation explained that they had embarked on a recruitment and training programme in a remote rural area of South Africa. They partnered with a local organisation to upskill and employ youth from a remote rural township.

**“We recently embarked on a different kind of impact sourcing; we went to a community in Nelspruit and partnered up with an organisation in the community.** We do the recruitment and sourcing and assist them with the training needed to work in a BPO.” (P:9)

These initiatives demonstrate that contact centres are looking beyond traditional recruitment practices and are leveraging new untapped talent pools. In addition, the innovative inclusionary practices highlighted by some participants show the forward-thinking that some contact centres have adopted in order to address inequality. The challenge for employers is nurturing the untapped potential of the marginalised youth cohorts and converting their hunger and enthusiasm for work into demonstrable work outcomes that will impact the bottom line.

Although the findings indicate that inclusive hiring occurs in some contact centres, participant two highlighted the need to adapt in-house recruitment practices.

**“We could leverage off the likes of behavioural psychologists and industrial psychologists and assessment practices.” (P:2)**

By including more advanced behavioural/industrial psychology services, contact centres could better assess the potential of recruits beyond the simplistic online assessments. Participant three suggested that candidates be assessed upfront to determine their suitability for the contact centre environment. More effort in the hiring phase could reduce the risk of training unsuitable candidates.

**“We should be doing more up front to understand if this person would be suitable for this environment profile.” (P:3)**

The next sub-theme that emerged from the data was training and development, which I have termed the second stage in the work transition stages.

#### **7.3.4.2 Sub-Theme: Work Transition Stage Two: Training and Development**

According to four participants (P:4; P:5; P:9; P:11), there was a need to broaden the scope of training to incorporate specific training in work readiness, corporate culture, mindsets, and soft skills. Participants were of the view that the training focus should not be on product or technical skills only. This view concurs with the literature, which indicates an increasing demand

for higher cognitive and socio-behavioural skills (Deming, 2017) and that demand for narrow job-specific skills is declining (Hanushek et al., 2017).

Participant four highlighted that marginalised youth will require more support, which means more effort and input from employers. The question regarding support is how employers effectively deliver on business mandates with a workforce that is not fully operational and requires extra support. The added pressure that support for marginalised youth place on employers raises the question of whether marginalised youth are suited for the call centre environment.

**“So, they require lots of support, lots of training, coaching, and mentoring,** not only to acquire the necessary skills for that role, and according to their job, but also just managing themselves appropriately and successfully in that work environment.” (P:4)

Two supervisors (P:5; P:7) stated that the training length for new hires was too short and should be extended.

**“Training periods are not given the full length, duration and attention that is needed.”** (P:5)

In addition to comprehensive training, two participants mentioned experiential or simulation training.

“Simulation training should support the theoretical training. Employees should be exposed to as many practical or experiential elements in training as possible. There should be time on the floor, time shadowing, and time getting to practice some of these activities as far as possible.” (P:5)

In a comprehensive review of five studies, including 1 556 studies, Frögéli et al. (2023) reported that structured and supported on-the-job training was shown to be the onboarding strategy with the strongest support. In addition, on-the-job training (OTJ) is positively linked to higher wage growth for workers and increased productivity and innovation for organisations (Acemoglu, 1998; Barron et al.,1997). According to P:5, using more experiential or on-the-job training has yielded positive results and allows for staggered progress.

**“What is useful is a programme of on-the-job training (OJT)** that allows a young person to make staggered progress towards full competency.” (P:5)

“The focus should be not just on the processes but on the person.” (P:11)

Conversely, training must also include a broad understanding of the organisation's mission. According to P:8, youth respond better when they understand the deeper organisational purpose and objectives behind activities versus just completing tasks. Transparent communication builds meaning and engagement.

“It is easier when the guys **know the common goal** or what we tried to do within the operation and working environment.” (P:8)

Leaders should not withhold context from young employees in a misguided attempt to protect youth from too much information. Inclusion in the vision and purpose of certain work campaigns inspires commitment (Shore et al., 2018).

Setting clear guidelines protects both the youth and the organisation. Without clear guidelines and boundary setting, youth may bend the rules or act out of self-interest without appreciating broader risks like contractual breaches or legal issues (Bauer & Erdogan, 2011).

“Employees must understand that since they are receiving a salary, they need to be there to fulfil a role and in doing so, **you have to abide by your code of conduct.**” (P:10)

Non-compliance to important regulations has serious legal consequences for contact centre operators. Handling sensitive data by first-time employers is a serious challenge for P:6. The highly regulated call centre environment has no place for non-compliant behaviour as there are far-reaching legal consequences for non-compliance with Protection of Personal Information (POPI, 2013) regulations. Identifying individuals who do not understand the importance of this from the outset are important in the hiring phase.

#### **7.3.4.2.1      *Work readiness***

All 12 participants agreed that dedicated work readiness programmes were needed for marginalised youth. Participant four mentioned that work readiness training should include self-management training.

**“They require lots of support, training, coaching, and mentoring,** not only to acquire the necessary skills for that role and according to their job but also manage themselves appropriately and successfully in that work environment.” (P:4)

Three participants mentioned the importance of including budgeting in a work readiness programme.

“As you get integrated into an environment, one of the major factors is that the guys are new to money and freedom. **They are not able to make good decisions with their money.**” (P:8)

“For example, this is how much you need for your transport to come to work; this is how much you will need for lunches. **Because there is a problem handling finances.**” (P:7)

While handling personal affairs such as budgeting falls out of the ambit of the professional workplace, according to participants, youth employees require assistance. Participant three was of the view that experts outside of the organisation should handle work readiness. This points to an opportunity for occupational social workers who have a nuanced understanding of youth to leverage the opportunity to meet the needs of employers.

**“For work readiness programmes, the industry should be much more open to partnering with people that are subject matter experts which may give you better results faster.”** (P:3)

Participant two, suggested that a standardised work readiness programme supported and endorsed by the industry regulator would give credibility to employment opportunities for marginalised youth.

**“We need a work readiness programme owned and endorsed by the industry regulator.” (P:2)**

According to P:5, work readiness programmes should incorporate personal mastery and emotional intelligence.

**“The work readiness programme we have has a strong theme and thread of personal mastery throughout as well as EQ tools.” (P:5)**

The need for personal mastery and emotional intelligence training is echoed by P:6, who comments that challenges in the workplace arise due to a lack of emotional intelligence.

**“The balance of your intelligence and emotional quotient is needed.” (P:6)**

Work readiness programs equip youth with the necessary skills to succeed. The above analysis highlights the importance of fostering workplace competencies among marginalised youth. Work readiness skills can prove invaluable by providing extended support and guidance through coaching and mentoring. These skills enable marginalised youth to understand workplace norms and facilitate a seamless transition into employment. The next section shows innovative feedback and coaching initiatives undertaken by organisations.

#### **7.3.4.2.2      *Innovative Feedback and Coaching Initiatives***

Four participants shared interesting insights into how coaching initiatives and work readiness practices could be structured. Participants five and 11 reiterated the importance of formal on-the-job training programmes and informal initiatives like coaching circles to develop skills gradually.

**“We applied work readiness intervention for four to six weeks, and then they went into an on-the-job-training type of environment, where we continued some of the principles of training.” (P:5)**

**“So, we have coaching circles, which are very small groups, which are spaces where you allow anyone to be super safe, and they can let out what is happening. And at some point, you want to keep it in the workspace. In all honesty, personal life and workspace it is one. We are here all the time.” (P:11)**

According to Naim and Lenka (2017), mentoring enables open discussion between mentees and mentors, providing psychological safety and expert advice. Participant nine mentioned that they conduct a similar concept to coaching circles, but termed the intervention ‘skip levels’.

**“We have skip levels, you know, the human resource team will conduct skip levels in parts of the organisation where it's completely confidential because now you can tell us whatever you are facing in operations, and it is just, you know, general questions and it is a platform for them to kind of speak.” (P:9)**



Participant two mentioned a feedback loop where employees were given direct customer feedback. This small tweak improved performance, which P:2 attributes to employees' value when they saw the difference they made to customers.

**“A year ago, I introduced a closed-loop feedback piece. Taking our customers surveys and sharing it with the individual made the difference. And after doing it for four consecutive weeks, the performance had a natural gravitation. And nobody could understand why we would suddenly see a difference in performance. But it was because people were feeling valued.” (P:2)**

The sentiment from participant two regarding youth needing to feel valued brings us full circle to the discussion earlier by Mowat (2015), which reiterates that the experience of marginalisation is a sense of being undervalued and excluded from a community or social group. The next section analysed the roles of peer mentoring and buddy programmes.

#### **7.3.4.2.3      *Peer Mentoring and Buddy Programmes***

All four organisations represented made use of buddy pairing systems. Buddy programmes coupled with formal coaching and mentoring programmes were endorsed by all 12 participants (100%) of the sample. According to a study by Nigah et al. (2012), buddying increased work engagement and positively impacted psychological capital. Participant 10 described her organisation's buddy system as pairing an experienced top performer with a new hire.

**“As a newbie, you would buddy up with someone experienced, preferably one of the top performers. You would listen to live calls and sit right next to them when you dial in**

so that they can help you when you are stuck with a client. They will be there to support you at all attempts.” (P:10)

“I think shadowing and buddying really worked.” (P:5)

According to P:12, some of the benefits of a coaching and mentoring programme include a smoother transition to work.

“Everyone had a mentor, and it helped with the transition to employment. **A mentor coaches in all these things.**” (P:12)

Apart from work readiness and peer mentoring, an important theme raised by two participants was digital upskilling.

#### **7.3.4.2.4      *Innovative Digital Upskilling***

Two participants shared insights on digital interventions within their organisations.

Participant one shared work she was involved in, which she termed a Digital Accelerator.

Participant one explained that this was an initiative that went beyond upskilling youth to include issues and work such as broadband infrastructure, broadband rollout, device refurbishment and access to devices, and skilling. Participant one was involved in a broader ‘employment and upskilling project that is beyond the scope of traditional BPO sector services’.

“A digital work accelerator is an aggregation of the partnerships between the private sector, public sector, and social partners. To bring together work that's being done in the digital landscape, and to try and accelerate that.” (P:1)

Recent literature confirms the value of such cross-sector collaborations in designing and delivering effective digital skills programmes. For instance, Pereira et al. (2019) found that co-

creating training by multiple stakeholders improves curriculum relevance while pooling complementary resources and expertise.

Another exciting initiative that could greatly impact the BPO sector is what P:1 termed the 'Future Skills Platform'. This is a development by a cross-section of BPO stakeholders, which will provide ready-to-use platform-based upskilling programmes for youth -designed specifically for the ITO (information technology) and BPO (business process) outsourcing sectors. Whitehead et al. (2023) explained that the learning platform being developed by BPESA called the Future Skills Platform, will focus on upskilling and reskilling call centre agents.

The Future Skills Platform demonstrates the power of multifaceted partnerships. Research by Haleem et al. (2022) highlights that emerging digital technologies offer inclusive and equitable learning opportunities; this promotes the UN's Sustainable Development 2030 agenda for quality education. Youth employees are at an advantage regarding digital technologies and can easily adapt to utilising digital tools. Egbon et al. (2024) argue that employers should create work environments that align with the new digital learning environment.

Additionally, P:3 described a grassroots social innovation where community members were trained on donated computers. The manager shared how a previously disadvantaged employer approached the organisation to partner with him in his planned upskilling initiative.

**“He converted a room in his own house to accommodate twenty donated PCs. He then taught his family members to teach the community digital skills.” (P:3)**

This initiative demonstrates the importance of local initiatives that complement larger efforts in digital skill-building. The excerpts underscore the significance of collaborative digital skills platforms and programmes involving diverse partners. Establishing localised initiatives and complex integrated ecosystems can equip young individuals with the necessary skills for technology-driven roles. Such initiatives are crucial for shaping the future workforce, and their implementation should be given adequate attention. Onboarding and induction is the second stage I have identified in the work transition stages and is elaborated on further in the next section.

#### **7.3.4.3 Sub-Theme: Work Transition Stage Three: Onboarding and Stage Four: Employment Stage**

According to P:9, the purpose of onboarding is to set expectations but should also aim to reduce the first-day anxieties of new hires. Participant 10 informed that onboarding covers orientation to the company mission, vision, culture, and code of conduct. Participant 12 stated that the onboarding phase also includes paired training, known as buddy training.

**“We do induction, where we go through what the job entails and make sure that they buddy up with someone who has experience before they start taking calls.”**

(P:12)

Participants represented four contact centre environments; three mentioned utilising a simulation/transition bay for training. A "Transition Bay" with decreased targets helps transition from training. (P:3; P:6; P:9)

**“We have an incubation/nesting stage** that you would go through first. Here, you speak to customers; you apply everything you have learned in training, but you are dealing with it on a **smaller volume.**” (P:9)

**“We have got a transition bay.** So, when they leave training, they are still in a supportive environment with decreased targets. In their environment, they continue to learn and get coaching support. **It is a much softer environment.**” (P:3)

Two participants were of the view that at the beginning of the work journey, the young employee requires quality feedback that should be instructional and not punitive. (P:6; P:12)

**“At the beginning, you do not get deductions on your quality. There is no one berating you and saying we told you should not do this.** What we do is point out your error and discuss how you are going to get better.” (P:6)

Buddying and floor shadowing at the beginning of the first month provides support. (P:5; P:10; P:12)

**“I think shadowing and buddying works.”** (P:5)

Participant four believed that frequent coaching conversations in the first few weeks are key. Onboarding and induction have been separated from training for the purposes of this report. Training in the BPO environment takes place primarily with trainers in a classroom-type setting and deals mainly with product and organisational practices. In contrast, onboarding is more on-the-job training, which occurs once training is complete. Note that in some contact centres, onboarding and training are combined, depending on how the human resource team organise the activities. The terms onboarding, induction and orientation have been used interchangeably by

participants in the present study, but all cover the beginning steps and introduction to the organisation.

The overall view is that a strong focus should be placed on supportive transition programmes that provide the tools, resources and time needed to successfully become fully functioning independent employees. Several participants expressed the view that extra support is needed with inexperienced hires. The next section of the report delves into the important findings related to work transition stages and the challenges employers and employees face. It analyses the implications of these findings and provides insights into each transition phase.

#### **7.3.4.4 Discussion Main Theme 4: Work Transition Stages**

Understanding the specific recruitment needs of marginalised youth is important since it was found that effective recruitment practices decreased employee turnover rates, with organisational commitment playing a mediating role (Guchait & Cho, 2010). South African employers facing increasing demand in a highly competitive environment could benefit from a better understanding of marginalised recruitment. According to Luo (2000), effective recruitment practices allow organisations to acquire the necessary competencies and skills to maintain a competitive advantage.

From the findings, there appears to be a need for a standardised comprehensive framework for marginalised youth recruitment. Participants mentioned ad hoc recruitment practices, which could inadvertently affect retention issues. The recruitment team could benefit from cultural awareness/diversity training to better understand the individuals they are hiring,

and design recruitment practices and policies that are better aligned to match youth needs and ultimately benefit the organisation's bottom line.

The transition or nesting programmes that contact centres have developed in three of the contact centres, point to concrete steps taken to gradually upskill youth participants. A valuable part of the nesting period is the opportunity to ‘shadow’ an experienced employer. Reduced targets and intensive shadowing at the beginning of the work transition process are highly beneficial for marginalised youth as these programmes can increase confidence and drive skill and competency. There is a lack of in-depth research on nesting and understanding on how incubation in contact centres takes place, which could significantly impact the development of a scientific approach to this beneficial practice.

Training in a contact centre is a formative experience for new hires and sets the tone for youth work experiences. Contact centre training closes an important growth and development gap that new hires from the South African schooling system might struggle with. The relationships between the trainer and the employee during the training are important. An empirical study by Sieben and De Grip (2004) of 525 call centre agents found that employees who took part in organisation training were less likely to quit their jobs. On-the-job training was specifically highlighted as an important theme in the research findings. Frögéli et al. (2023) advocates for more specific attention to be given to how on the job training is implemented.

The human resources team can contribute to creating a positive work environment that fosters employee growth and development while addressing any challenges. In addition to the influence of the human resource and training teams, work readiness programmes are featured as

a prominent theme. In a society with significant inequality, the significance of work readiness or employability programmes cannot be overstated.

The Siyakha Youth Assets Study (Graham et al., 2019b), which evaluated eight large youth employability programmes, showed that the employability programmes positively impacted the emotional well-being of young people, including increased resilience, self-confidence, self-care, self-insight and self-esteem. This study shows that through employability programmes, employers can grow the bottom line by upskilling and preparing youth for work, but can also contribute to the personal development of youth. Whitehead et al. (2023) caution that while unemployed youth are talented, employers must treat them differently at the beginning of their employment journey by providing custom training and induction solutions.

The role and qualities of team leaders were a dominant theme that emerged from the data; these include 1) communication and relationship building, 2) humility and service-oriented leadership, and 3) empathy and understanding. Delving into the qualities of a suitable team leader adds value to the discussion on team leader talent pool development.

### **7.3.5            Micro-Systems - Main Theme 5: Team Leader Qualities (Exo-System)**

The micro-system in Bronfenbrenner's model is "the interactions that youth have with family members, peers, in schools and within their communities, which have the most direct and significant impact on the development of an individual" (Lőrinc et al. 2020, p.418). According to Lőrinc et al.'s interpretation, the relationships with team leaders directly impacting youth employees are categorised as part of the micro-system.



McDonnell et al. (2013) posit that the role of team leaders in a contact centre is an under-researched employee category in the literature. In an empirical study drawing on data from nine Australian contact centres, McDonnell et al. (2013) found that the team leader's role is integral to the effectiveness of contact centres. Communication and relationship building is the most dominant theme with eight of the 12 participants (67%) mentioning open communication, building trust and ensuring transparency as key between managers and youth.

#### **7.3.5.1 Sub-theme: Communication and Relationship Building**

Younger workers look for a work environment that fosters a culture of collaboration and teamwork, where they can communicate regularly with their supervisors and receive frequent feedback (Gursoy et al. 2008).

“Your **trainer plays a huge part** because now you have built the trust for a two-three-week period. So, the relationship is stronger.” (P:9)

The statement by P:10 about people not leaving jobs but rather leaving managers is poignant in light of the high attrition in call centres. If this statement is true, the reverse would be that youth employees can be retained in contact centre roles because of a positive relationship with supervisors. The direct impact of the supervisor relationship on employee retention should be empirically investigated.

While a compassionate and open communicative relationship is important, two participants pointed out that not all managers display this in the workplace.

**“You are lucky if you get a leader who understands you are brand new to the working world. You're unemployed.** There are some team leaders that will sit and hold your hand and then show you what to do and how to do it. And some will just be okay with you in the working world now. You have to sink or swim.” (P:7)

Half of the 12 participants (50%) highlighted the importance of patience, dedicating time to establish connections, and providing young people with soft skills. In addition, P:9 added that creating confidential forums, for youth to openly discuss concerns, assisted in developing open positive communication channels between all levels in the organisation.

Participant five felt that what was lacking was a forum to discuss difficult-to-understand company policies. For young employees to truly understand their rights in the workplace and operate from a place of knowledge, a firm understanding of company policies is important. Taking time to bridge the divide between those who write the policies, i.e. human resources and management and those who are consumers of the policies, i.e. youth, will go a long way to empowering youth and creating an understanding of workplace engagement rules.

**“We should have workshops and master classes where we unpack policies”. (P:5)**

**Participant 12 informed that employees have digital access to policies in her organisation.**

**“Our policies are on the intranet, on SharePoint so that everyone can see and refer back to the policies.” (P:12)**

While P:12 emphasised that access to company policies is available for staff, the participant did not articulate that a working understanding of these policies existed for youth. Business documents such as contracts and policies are written in legal jargon that is difficult to interpret. It is often the case that young individuals who have been marginalised are the first ones in their households to secure formal employment. This means that young individuals may not have the resources in their homes or communities to assist with interpreting business documents. Being cognisant of this potential knowledge gap and taking steps to bridge this through policy workshops and masterclasses, may be beneficial to all.

### **7.3.5.2 Sub-theme: Humility and Service-oriented Leadership**

Owens et al. (2013) point out that expressed humility is the tendency to approach interpersonal interactions with a strong motive for learning through others. Three participants (25%) believed that young employees respond better to humble, open, and collaborative leadership, than to a dictatorial leadership. These participants' narrative was that team leaders should avoid assuming they know everything and instead be open to learning from younger team members. Participant five pointed to the need for a balance of power between the leaders and the employees.

**“The leader should not assume that they hold all of the knowledge, and that the employee is the recipient”. (P:5)**

Participants nine and 11 concur that an open and collaborative leadership style is required in contact centres.

**“An ideal team leader would be open to what your employees have to say and work together to achieve a goal; it is not a dictatorship. It is always working with your people”.** (P:9)

**“Humility, patience and really seeing your people.”** (P:11)

The excerpts above point to team leaders needing to have a deep level of emotional intelligence. According to Serrat (2017), emotional intelligence is linked to managing the emotions of oneself, of others, and of groups. Demonstrating emotional intelligence requires self-work that may be challenging for young supervisors who are not mentored or do not receive coaching to develop this skill. Interestingly, participants did not mention whether their organisations provided upward coaching and mentoring to develop their skill sets. This gap highlights a potential area for organisational improvement, particularly as the participants emphasised that empathy and understanding are crucial leadership qualities for a supervisor.

### **7.3.5.3 Sub-theme: Empathy and Understanding**

All 12 participants (100%) concurred that empathy and understanding were key for working with marginalised youth.

**“It is important for us to have empathy, you know, as managers, because you are dealing with people, you know, that I have never worked before.”** (P:9)

**“But I think our secret sauce is that we hired leaders with a growth and youth focus. Leaders were passionate about coaching and developing young people, and we had taken those leaders through the personal mastery-type principles.”** (P:5)

Five participants emphasised the importance of managers investing time to actively coach, mentor and develop young employees through transparent, empowering relationships. P:5, who manages several team leaders, stated that finding passionate team leaders who care about young people is important.

**“You are looking for leaders that are passionate about coaching youth and developing youth” (P:5).**

**This view was shared by P:7, who has worked with young people in the contact centre for seventeen years and had the following to say about her role:**

**“I have a passion for it, and I want to see the people succeed because that reflects on me and what I have done to help them get to that point. I love to do that because, at the end of the day, I want the best for the people.” (P:7)**

Participant two showed that understanding the contexts that youth come from helps you to lead better.

**“I’ve gone into people’s homes to understand what their infrastructure looks like; why are you 20-30 minutes late? What are the challenges that you face in getting 30 minutes earlier?” (P:2)**

To be a person-centric leader, knowing your workforce and understanding their home circumstances is essential. This perspective helps supervisors to acknowledge the real challenges

that employees may face and can assist in creating a safe and supportive work environment. It is also important to understand that the success of youth transitions depends on accounting for youth employees' whole selves and lives, not just their workplace competencies. Understanding youth employees' personal and family responsibilities and professional aspirations creates a holistic understanding of the youth-work interface.

**“The person will like literally cry and tell you about the personal issues they have had. That is the reason they are not able to perform.” (P:12)**

While empathic employers and a caring workforce assist youth transition, it is important to note the role that employers can and cannot play. Supervisors are not trained therapists and should not shoulder the emotional burden of supporting youth emotionally. However, understanding what they can handle in-house and what they should refer to professionals requires support and training. The role of employers is not to act as a social service provider or to address behavioural issues, that should instead be addressed in a therapeutic setting. A strong view raised by P:3 was that it is ‘too much to expect companies to deal with all the socialisation issues that youth face.’

**“As an organisation, you have got to say, are we ready for that? Am I ready to address all of the social evils? We have our cafe staff and cleaning staff, who have been continuously disrespected. But how do you teach somebody that this is not acceptable behaviour? Can you go that deep? Your role is to make sure that they are ready in terms of a job”. (P:3)**

The excerpt above underscores the dissonance that employers experience between the behavioural and emotional needs that youth exhibit. Furthermore, employers experience the impact of a lack of socialisation at the youth-work interface. The following section discusses this dissonance further

#### **7.3.5.4 Discussion of Main Theme 5: Team Leader Qualities**

McDonnell et al. (2013) rightly point out that though the team leader role consists of complexities and contradictions, it remains an integral part of what constitutes an effective call centre.

The reality for team leaders is that marginalised youth who have faced socio-economic exclusion may enter the workplace engrained with attitudes and behaviours that are not a good work fit for the contact centre environment. The socio-economic circumstances, therefore, add a further level of complexity to managing first-time employees.

Employers require employees to enter the workforce with a level of professionalism and an understanding of workplace norms that match the empathy received. Further research needs to be conducted to better understand how marginalised youth can acquire the socialisation necessary to thrive at work. Is acquiring socialisation skills the responsibility of the education system, or should youth employees receive these skills from home?

The process where newcomers transition from being organisational outsiders to insiders is termed organisational socialisation (Bauer et al., 2007). Moving from the outer circle to understanding the language and norms of the inside does not come naturally but is a learnt behaviour. Arias et al. (2019) posit that the home environment is crucial in promoting education.

Employers have a double challenge to address: filling the skills gap in the education system and the socialisation gap developed in the family system. This double skill and socialisation gap requires the support of professionals such as occupational social workers, educational psychologists, community development workers, and family support specialists who can provide targeted interventions, facilitate access to resources, and help bridge the divide between individual capabilities and social integration needs.

According to Singh (2013), there is a preference among youth to work with supervisors who are willing to mentor them. The finding from the current study showed that 16 (80%) youth participants benefited from regular supportive contact/coaching from their supervisors. Lerner et al. (2015) proposed that youth thrive in psychologically and socially safe spaces with a caring, competent, and reliably committed adult, such as a mentor, coach, teacher, or faith leader. There is an opportunity to design contact centre employment that aligns with employer needs and considers how a viable employee value proposition can be established.

Totterdell and Holman (2003) posited that supervisor and colleague support are crucial job resources as they create a positive work environment that helps employees experience positive emotions more easily. Naim and Lenka (2017) agree that mentoring is important among young employees since they seek learning, feedback, and emotional support.

These findings suggest that creating an environment that fosters psychological and social safety, with caring and competent mentors, coaches, or teachers, can help youth thrive in the workplace. There is value for employers to invest in upskilling supervisors so that they have the necessary skills and competence to work with young employees. Supportive environments for



youth employees can lead to positive outcomes for the employees and the organisation. Supervisors play a crucial role in assisting youth to socialise in the workplace.

However, it is more than the relationship with mentors and supervisors that determines a conducive interface for youth; it is the manner in which the contact centre is designed. The organisational design of contact centre employment should align with youth and employer needs.

#### **7.4 Conclusion**

This chapter showcased four main work transition stages namely, stage one: recruitment and hiring; stage two: training and development; stage three: onboarding; and stage four: employment. These stages add value to the understanding of employees' experience of work and delve deeper into the nuances of the work transition interface. In addition, the qualities of suitable leaders were expounded on, providing employers with criteria to consider when making team leader promotion decisions. Chapter eight presents an occupational social work model of practice developed from the research findings drawn from both the youth and organisation data presented in chapters six and seven.

## **CHAPTER EIGHT**

### **Youth Transition to Employment: An Occupational Social Work Model of Practice**

#### **8.1 Introduction**

Chapter eight presents a practice model for occupational social workers focusing on issues at the youth-organisation interface. The chapter expands on the roles and functions occupational social workers can play with youth and organisations across the micro-, meso-, and macro-levels of intervention.

#### **8.2 The Development of the Occupational Social Work Youth-Transition Model of Practice**

The Department of Social Development (2020) emphasises the importance of assessing work-related issues and their relationships within the work environment. This emphasis together with Bronfenbrenner's (1979, 1998) framework underpin the model that was developed and contribute to an understanding of youth's felt experiences at various points in their transition journey. In addition, the model aligns with Kruger and Van Breda's (2009) emphasis on the importance of goodness of fit and the person-in-environment perspectives.

Akabas and Kurzman (2015) argue that organisations need professionals such as occupational social workers with advanced generalist skills who can apply systems thinking to address workplace needs. In addition, the roles and functions in this current occupational social work model align with those suggested by Smith and Gould (1993), including titles such as

employee counsellor, community relations consultant, and career planning and development counsellor.

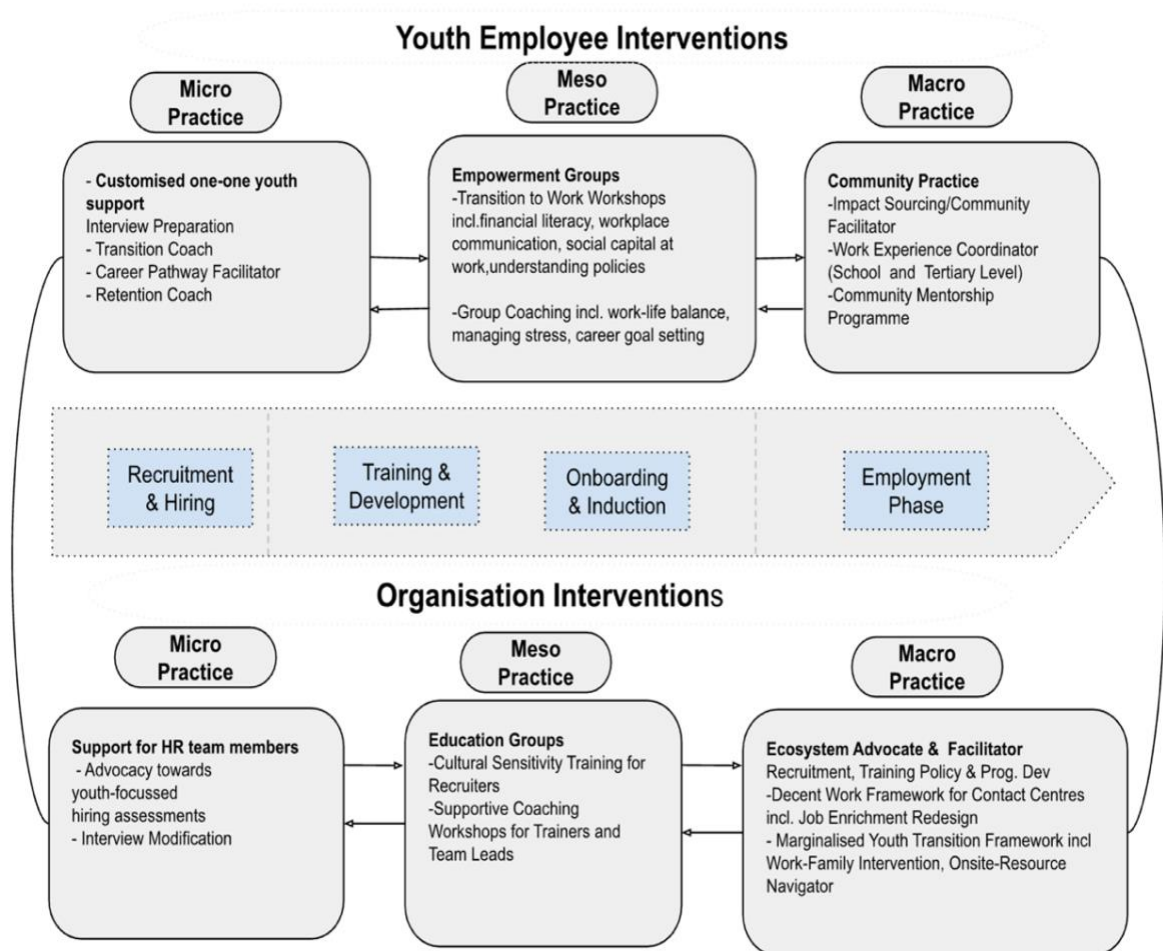
While this model is based on sound theoretical frameworks, a critical aspect of the model is that it is drawn from the main findings of this research study. Incorporating the experiences and felt needs of youth, as well as the perspectives of employers, achieves the goal of the study. This is to understand youth transition issues better and to contribute a research-based model of practice that occupational social workers can utilise to bridge the gap. Additionally, the model bridges the micro-macro divide by offering integrated roles and functions that practitioners can employ with individuals, groups and communities across the stages of youth transition, at both the employee and employer levels.

### **8.2.1 Understanding the Occupational Social Work Model of Practice**

The Occupational Social Work Youth-Transition Model in Figure 14 tracks marginalised youths' employment journey through four phases: recruitment, training, onboarding, and employment. It explores the experiences and needs of employees and the organisation at each phase, as well as occupational social work interventions at different levels.

**Figure 14**

*Occupational Social Work Model of Practice with Marginalised Youth Transitioning to Employment*



The following section examines micro-practice interventions with marginalised youth, which include youth-focused assessment, interview modification, interview preparation, transition, and retention coaching.

### **8.3 Micro-Practice Interventions**

The micro-practice interventions explored in the model begin at the first point of contact that youth have with potential employers, namely, the recruitment phase. Four employers in this study suggested that the recruitment process for youth employees needed adjustment. Guchait and Cho (2010) underscore the importance of understanding the recruitment needs of employees, as this could contribute to a decrease in employee turnover.

Some interventions at the recruitment stage include providing interview preparation for youth employees who lack prior interview experience. They can also intervene with recruiters by restructuring the interview process and broadening the scope of service to include assessment processes focused on youth. Each of these roles is expanded on in the next section.

#### **8.3.1 Youth-Focused Assessment**

The Department of Social Development (2020) emphasises the importance of occupational social workers and the role they play in work-focused assessments. Based on the study's findings and the South African Act's mandate, specific youth-focused assessments are proposed. Seven of the 20 (35%) participants expressed having limited financial means to function daily. In addition, seven of the youth participants (35%) were single mothers with specific childcare needs. Youth-focused employee assessments would examine new employees' social circumstances and assist employers in developing interventions to help youth employees overcome barriers to work and succeed in their roles.

### **8.3.2 Interview Modification and Preparation**

Akabas and Kurzman (2005) emphasise the importance of human resource management in achieving organisational goals, with occupational social workers playing a key role in supporting recruitment and hiring processes. To better understand the potential of inexperienced youth, four out of 12 (33%) employer participants suggested modifying the interview questions to relate more to youth experiences. From a recruitment perspective, youth-focused assessments will ensure a good match between the role and prospective employees' suitability. A BPO expert in the study stated that the sector could benefit from behavioural and industrial psychologists' assessments. Interview preparation programs, including mock interviews for marginalised populations, could boost youth confidence and ease their entry into the workforce (Anaza et al., 2023; Huss et al., 2017). Whitehead et al. (2023) suggest that organisations acknowledge the potential of unemployed youth and provide transition support. The following section will expand on occupational social workers' roles as transition coaches, retention coaches, and career pathway facilitators.

### **8.3.3 Transition Coaches**

All (100%) organisation participants in the present study unanimously agreed that marginalised youth lack workplace skills and require assistance with work readiness programs. Similarly, 10 youth participants (50%) had a challenging contact centre experience and could benefit from support from a transition coach. According to Akabas and Kurzman (2005), coaches provide objective guidance and support, helping individuals gain confidence, set achievable goals, and develop action plans.

Occupational social workers operating from an inherent strengths-based perspective can serve as transition coaches, providing support to help marginalised employees navigate the complexities of their work environment. This coaching can bridge the gap between difficult circumstances and workplace demands by helping youth understand professional norms, manage stress, build relationships, and develop effective communication skills. By leveraging the inherent determination of youth and providing targeted support, occupational social workers can empower youth to overcome barriers and thrive in their careers. Helping an organisation unlock the emotional intelligence of its management can give a competitive edge, with executive coaching or life coaching offering an innovative approach, aligned with social work skills (Akabas & Kurzman, 2005).

#### **8.3.4 Retention Coaches**

Occupational social workers can act as retention coaches, providing one-on-one coaching to identify at-risk employees and address turnover through innovative interventions (Armstrong, 2006; Thite et al., 2014). According to Budhwar et al. (2009), contact centres are linked to monotonous, stressful work, which leads to high employee turnover. Fifty per cent of employee participants (6 out of 12) concurred with Budhwar's conclusion that contact centre employment are stressful and monotonous. Developing supportive interventions and advice can help youth employees decide to stay in their roles or leave, improving satisfaction and reducing turnover rates (Malik & Nilakant, 2011; Presbitero et al., 2016; Queiri & Dwaikat, 2016; Thite & Russel, 2010).

### **8.3.5 Career Pathway Facilitators**

Many marginalised youth lack access to career guidance and support since they come from households where family members are unemployed. Occupational social workers can serve as career pathway facilitators by providing long-term career guidance, which can assist youth in using the contact centre as a stepping stone to success. Due to limited access to career education services, marginalised youth have a scarcity of career knowledge, which presents as a barrier to career development (Stead and Nqweni 2006). Limited access to career education services and a scarcity of knowledge of training institutions are career barriers that have frequently been cited in the career development of disadvantaged youth employment training, personnel and guidance services.

In the contact centre environment, Whitehead et al. (2023) suggest that employers should identify individuals with potential and guide them toward diverse career paths. In the study, 13 of the 20 youth (65%) had been in their roles for one year or more, pointing to the need for assistance in finding growth opportunities through a career pathway facilitator.

According to Akabas and Kurzman (2005), social workers in the workplace tend to confine their role to addressing individual issues, neglecting the opportunity to integrate their practice into organisational or community requirements. The next section of the model explores meso- and macro- practice interventions.

## **8.4 Meso-practice Interventions**

This section explores the roles and functions of occupational social work at a meso-practice level. In social work, meso-practice interventions are also called “social work with



groups and group work” and are “aimed at meeting socio-emotional needs and accomplishing tasks” (Toseland & Rivas, 2009, p.12). Potential occupational social work roles with marginalised youth include educational and skill development workshops, group coaching, and supportive interventions for employer groups.

#### **8.4.1 Empowerment Groups**

Toseland and Rivas (2001) identified five treatment groups: educational, support, growth, therapy, and socialisation. In addition to these groups, a further category identified through the research findings is empowerment groups. Empowerment groups address communication, financial literacy, and workplace policies indicated as needs. Occupational social workers could customise interventions for transitioning youth. The following section delves into various empowerment groups that could be beneficial for young people making the transition to employment.

##### **8.4.1.1 Communication Workshops**

Marginalised youth often lack essential communication and social capital skills for workplace success (De Lannoy, 2018; Haider, 2016). In this study, 12 participants (60%) felt that they lacked experience, knowledge and self-confidence as they entered the work environment. Developing the confidence to build workplace relationships is an essential and often taken-for-granted workplace skill. According to Requena (2003), social capital or building workplace relationships is a crucial predictor of work quality and job satisfaction. Social workers can play an essential role in upskilling and training in the workplace (Kurzman, 2013).

#### **8.4.1.2 Financial Literacy Workshops**

The OECD (2017) defines financial literacy as having the knowledge, understanding, skills, motivation, and confidence to make effective financial decisions and improve financial well-being. In recent years, social workers have begun to secure roles within corporate wellness programs, contributing to organisational training and development (Hughes et al., 2018).

Marginalised youth face the challenge of earning low incomes while also supporting their families through 'black tax' (Magubane, 2017). Occupational social workers in South Africa could develop culturally sensitive financial literacy workshops for youth that consider the dynamics of black tax. Workshops for entry-level employees can help marginalised youth navigate their financial challenges and improve their overall financial well-being by considering unique cultural and social factors. Ultimately, enhancing financial literacy among marginalised youth supports their immediate financial needs, fosters long-term economic resilience and aids participation in broader economic life.

#### **8.4.1.3 Workshops about Workplace Policies**

Understanding workplace policies is crucial for marginalised youth, as it empowers them to navigate their work environments effectively and enhances socialisation in the workplace (Klein et al., 2015; Bauer & Erdogan, 2011; Stein & Christiansen, 2010). According to Bauer et al. (2007), organisational socialisation is transitioning newcomers from organisational outsiders to insiders.

A solid grasp of workplace rights can significantly impact workplace experiences. Promoting workplace rights is in keeping with the ILO's (1999) definition of 'decent work', which includes promoting labour rights, and encouraging open social dialogue.

Policy roll-out training workshops can help bridge the policy knowledge gap. Equipping youth with the knowledge of their rights empowers them to advocate for themselves and enhances their confidence in navigating workplace dynamics.

#### **8.4.1.4 Work-Life Balance Workshops**

The contact centre environment has high-stress levels, burnout, and a high degree of attrition (Bhatnagar, 2007; Oshri et al., 2015; Presbitero et al., 2016). Research by Doellgast et al. (2020) indicates that investments in training within contact centres are associated with reduced stress and burnout and increased job satisfaction. Similarly, an empirical study conducted by Charoensukmongkol and Puyod (2022), involving 412 contact centre agents across five organisations, revealed that mindfulness practices reduce emotional exhaustion among contact centre employees. According to Hughes et al. (2008), social workers have begun securing corporate wellness programs' roles, contributing to organisational training and development (Hughes et al., 2018). Achieving a work-life balance in this demanding environment requires effective stress management techniques, including relaxation strategies, coping mechanisms for stressors and burnout, and healthy lifestyle habits. However, the fast-paced nature of contact centres presents challenges in finding the time and resources to implement these strategies while maintaining productivity.

Effective time management and task prioritisation are crucial for balancing work and personal life and establishing clear boundaries. Nevertheless, Holman et al. (2007) argue that the

rigid and tightly regulated time constraints typical in contact centres may not adequately support employees striving to balance their professional and personal lives. Meso-level interventions such as workplace life balance workshops or group coaching must be integrated with macro-level systemic and advocacy efforts. Systems theory and ecological systems theory (Bronfenbrenner, 1979) highlight the interdependence of organisational and societal level interventions, emphasising the need for a holistic approach.

An opportunity exists to provide group coaching for marginalised youth where the power of positive peer pressure can be utilised. The next section examines group coaching further.

#### **8.4.2 Group Coaching**

Dorkin (2009) delves into the parallels between coaching and occupational social work, emphasising how both are centred on building relationships to drive change and enhance personal or professional lives. Coaching aims to empower individuals to identify resources within themselves and their environment in order to improve their situation. According to O'Connor and Cavanagh (2017), group coaching includes various methods such as facilitation, training, peer-to-peer coaching, and small group processes. While limited evidence of group coaching with youth employees exists, Bonneywell (2016) and Fusco et al. (2016) point to positive empirical evidence of group coaching interventions for senior-level employees.

Britton (2015) suggests that group coaching in organisations can scale coaching, enhance organisational capacity, and reduce silos. While there may be benefits to group coaching, it was not widely used in this study, with only one of the three organisations including group coaching as part of its workplace interventions.

Occupational social workers could play a crucial role in implementing group coaching in organisations by facilitating small group discussions, providing training and peer-to-peer coaching, and guiding self-driven groups. Specialised coaching groups supporting ‘at risk’ employees, such as single mothers, could benefit youth employees. Seven of the 20 participants (35%) in the present study had dependents.

In addition, achieving a healthy work-life balance is essential in high-stress contact centres. Coaching workshops on coping with stress are vital. Eight youth (40%) participants expressed that contact centre stress made the transition to work a challenge. Occupational social workers utilising group coaching could address these issues. The following section examines this further.

#### **8.4.3 Supportive Coaching Workshops for Trainers and Supervisors/Team Leads**

According to Jacobs and Roodt (2011), contact centre agents should possess competencies such as adaptability, assurance and empathy. Team leaders or supervisors working with youth employees must upskill youth in these competencies. Marginalised youth need specialised communication, coaching, and people management skills to meet the demands of this workforce.

Sixteen of the 20 youth participants (80%) reported that positive relationships with supervisors and team leads assisted them in adapting to work. Supporting trainers and team leads will strengthen youth's transition to employment. During the research process, I conducted a training workshop for 25-30 Community Managers from eight different African countries on

'Co-creating Thriving Communities: Managing Expectations Self-care for Community Coordinators.' This workshop demonstrated the need for ongoing upskilling of managers at the youth-employment interface.

#### **8.4.4 Cultural Competence Training for Recruiters**

Mouboua et al. (2024) define cross-cultural competence as the ability of individuals and organisations to navigate and interact effectively across different cultural contexts. According to Hughes et al. (2018), social work practitioners are required to have cross-cultural competence. Mouboua et al. (2024) argue that in human resources, developing cross-cultural competence is crucial for building inclusive workplaces that value diversity and maximise employees' potential.

Well-trained and experienced occupational social workers can assist by offering cultural sensitivity training for recruiters, trainers, and team leaders. The training could equip recruiters with skills to navigate cultural differences and communicate effectively with youth from diverse backgrounds. It could cover unconscious bias, cultural awareness, and cross-cultural communication.

A holistic approach that empowers individuals and addresses systemic inequities is crucial to supporting marginalised youth transitioning to employment. This includes advocating for policies that promote inclusivity and equity instead of emphasising individual adaptation (Bal & Doci, 2018). The next part of the model explores macro-level practice and occupational social work roles at an advocacy and systemic level.

## **8.5 Macro-Level Practice**

Macro-level practice interventions should be designed and implemented to create positive change in organisations, communities, and policy development (Netting et al., 2011). Social workers are mandated to not only promote the general welfare of client communities, but more importantly, to advocate for conditions that meet basic needs and achieve social justice objectives (National Association of Social Work, 2008). This mandate is in keeping with the Department of Social Development (2020), which emphasises the importance of occupational social work services in promoting a fair work environment. The Department of Social Development recognition has a macro-service focus that emphasises community initiatives and policy development to enhance the well-being of employees, their families, and the wider community.

Occupational social workers play an essential advocacy role and are uniquely positioned to understand the importance of ecosystems and enable connections at micro- and macro-levels (Munford & Sanders, 2019). The following section outlines the policy frameworks needed to underpin effective service delivery for youth.

### **8.5.1 Policy Frameworks**

Policy frameworks that address youth-specific needs are much needed. Four policy needs emerged from the research: recruitment, training, decent work, and rewards policy frameworks.

#### **8.5.1.1 Youth Recruitment Policy**

A focused youth recruitment policy is needed as recruiting marginalised youth requires a specialised approach that differs from standard recruitment practices (Guchait & Cho, 2010; Luo, 2000). This policy solution should include 1) adapting the recruitment drives to include more impact sourcing initiatives, 2) refining the interview process, and 3) modifying the onboarding and induction process for marginalised youth.

A potential role in the recruitment phase could be that trained occupational social workers serve as impact sourcing and community work facilitators. This role would entail bridging the gap between communities and contact centres by coordinating recruitment efforts and promoting impact sourcing. It could facilitate the awareness of contact centre opportunities in local areas and help close the networking gap that often hinders youth from accessing job opportunities.

Occupational social workers could also act as work-experience coordinators, helping build the recruitment pipeline by initiating student work-experience interventions. This could involve organising open days, immersion experiences, and virtual tours of contact centres to provide exposure and insight into the industry. This would benefit the BPO sector and help close the work experience gap in multiple sectors. This role aligns with the career-enrichment programmes suggested by Iversen (2001).

#### **8.5.1.2 Youth Training Policy**

The second policy initiative presented in the model is a customised youth training policy. A tailored training policy is needed as young employees with no formal work experience adapt



differently to the workforce (Herr, 1999; Mitchell & Gamlem, 2017; Saks & Gruman, 2018). Sixty-five per cent of youth in this study showed their desire to learn by pursuing tertiary education. There were financial roadblocks to completing their studies with, only 25% of youth participants graduating and 40% not completing their studies. Occupational social workers and human resource practitioners can collaborate to develop ongoing training linked to tertiary education. This training would create more formal credentials that youth could use to bolster their career growth.

Linked to training is the need for ongoing mentorship in the transition journey. Lerner et al. (2015) found that youth thrive in safe spaces with supportive adults, life skills-building experiences, and leadership opportunities. Naim and Lenka (2017) reiterate the critical role mentorship plays for youth: it provides growth opportunities through learning, feedback, and emotional support. A community-based mentorship programme is recommended to address this gap, connecting marginalised youth with successful individuals with similar backgrounds.

### **8.5.1.3 Decent Work Policy for Youth**

The third policy needed to assist youth transition to employment is a 'Decent Work Policy' specifically designed for contact centres. Blustein et al. (2023), a leading advocate of the 'Decent Work Framework', said that occupational social work could draw on the established psychology of working theory to offer valuable insights into the BPO sector.

A decent work policy framework for contact centres could ensure fair working conditions, proper training, mental and physical health support, and career growth opportunities.

Ngai and Yuen-Tsang (2011) argue in favour of decent work and propose a new model of occupational social work in China that prioritises labour education and community organisation to raise awareness of labour rights and enhance workers' participation and representation. South Africa could learn from the Chinese approach, Social Ventures Australia (SVA, 2016), and Youth Employment UK, which have established fair work benchmarks that hold employers accountable.

The study's findings have revealed significant insights into the specific transition needs of marginalised youth and the complexities at the youth-work interface. These findings have far-reaching implications and can contribute to developing a Marginalised Youth Transition Framework. This policy framework could incorporate an end-to-end approach to youth employment to ensure a smooth transition process for youth employees.

#### **8.5.1.4 Youth Rewards and Benefits Policy**

The study revealed that none of the organisations researched had a formal rewards policy. However, four employer participants (33%) highlighted the importance of rewards and recognition in the workplace. A customised youth rewards policy is needed to recognise contact centre work as meaningful. Bussin et al.'s (2019) seminal work on developing a total rewards programme for youth could be adapted to meet the needs of marginalised youth and their employers.

#### **8.5.2 Ecosystem Advocate and Facilitator**

One of the organisations in the study revealed that they functioned as an ecosystem facilitator. This role involved forging partnerships with civil society, government, and non-

governmental institutions to create a multi-level system approach to addressing youth unemployment challenges. Three of the 12 (25%) employer participants highlighted the importance of a partnership with the education sector due to the gap between what employers' need and young employees' readiness to meet that need.

Iversen (2001) suggests that occupational social workers must collaborate with businesses to improve organisational systems and resource management for unemployed, dislocated, and marginalised youth workers. Occupational social workers can effectively undertake this role of ecosystem facilitation. They are well-positioned to coordinate and facilitate critical partnerships between key stakeholders. Occupational social workers have a crucial advocacy role in promoting decent work for marginalised youth in BPOs. To effectively fulfil this role, occupational social workers must know the complex relationships between society, labour, and management in various industries. Nandan et al. (2015) argue that occupational social workers in macro-practices such as administration, policy practice, and community organising should be equipped to change systems and contexts. Iversen (1998) proposes refocusing practice on the employment needs of poor people to advance the profession's mission of increasing equality and social justice. Occupational social workers working with marginalised youth must understand the importance of advocacy and systems change.

Occupational social workers also need to become involved in job enrichment redesign. Collaboration between occupational social workers and human resources practitioners can help redesign marginalised youth's roles in the business process outsourcing sector. Ramanathan (1991) asserts that social workers involved in in-house programs can effectively advocate for,

and drive, organisational changes by influencing human resource managers to prioritise job enrichment and redesign.

This partnership can identify areas for support and training and develop job enrichment opportunities for the employer and the youth employees. This role could lead to more rewarding work experiences and improved retention rates.

### **8.5.3 Work-Family Intervention Framework**

Lerner (2021) suggests mutual influences exist between individuals and their peers within family, school, and community environments. This aligns with this study, where 11 of the 20 participants (55%) expressed that they received support and assistance from their family. Understanding the needed family interventions required is crucial to supporting the successful transition of marginalised youth into employment.

Iversen (2001) emphasises that occupational social work intervention requires collecting data on workplace issues, including childcare, transportation problems, work-family conflicts, and low wages that disadvantage employees. This data is crucial for promoting support services within the workplace. This is particularly true for South Africa where youth face ‘Black tax’ or the obligation to assume financial support for family members (Magubane, 2017). Twelve participants (60%) felt obligated to support their family financially despite it being a financial challenge; this obligation exacerbated the youth’s financial situation, causing some to get into debt.

A work-family framework involving collaboration among workplace interventionists can address the needs of marginalised youth. This focus means that occupational social workers can

expand their practice beyond employees to include intervention with employees' family members. One type of intervention that could be developed is 'Family Resource Centres'. Family plays a critical role in positive youth development. Establishing resource centres within workplaces could offer information, referrals, and support services for families of marginalised youth. In addition, occupational social workers could offer family mentoring programs to connect marginalised youth and their families with mentors who can provide guidance, support, and positive role modelling for the extended family and community.

Of the 20 youth participants, six (30%) had heard of supportive services such as an EAP, but only one youth (5%) participant in the present study utilised the service. This finding calls for a radically different way to support youth in the workplace. An onsite resource navigator is an excellent example of having in-demand services available for employees that could alter the utilisation of EAP service. Resource Navigator companies like 'The SOURCE' and 'Ask the Navigator' can provide centralised resources to connect individuals, services, and support networks and have on-site navigators who address concerns related to childcare, transportation, housing, and company benefits while ensuring confidentiality (Gilsdorf & Hanleybrown, 2017). Dimoff and Kelloway (2017) point out that EAPs in contact centres are under-utilised; therefore, there is a need for alternative solutions that are onsite and customised services for youth employees. Occupational social workers can serve as on-site resource navigators to address the unique needs of youth employees and employers, potentially improving their well-being, job satisfaction, and wider organisational success.

## **8.6 Implementing the Occupational Social Work Model in Practical Settings**

The reality for occupational social workers is that implementing an integrated practice model approach in everyday practice settings depends on the organisation in which the occupational social worker is employed. For example, occupational social workers operating as independent consultants may not have the organisational mandate to implement an integrated level of practice.

Additionally, the work transition stages presented in the study are not linear in the workplace. Some organisations combine training and onboarding, and others include training as part of the employment phase or learning on the job. For the purpose of intervention, occupational social workers would need to assess and understand the specific arrangement in each workplace and apply the model of practice accordingly. It is important to conduct a thorough needs analysis and tailor interventions accordingly.

For holistic service delivery to occur, occupational social workers should have the awareness and knowledge to make practice recommendations across the levels of practice depending on the client's need and the environment the client is in. Netting (2005) asserts that the future of macro-social work is dependent on what social workers learn about clients at the assessment stage and move toward a deeper understanding of the client context. A macro-worker with a firm understanding of micro social work needs should be capable of either providing the necessary service if their skill set allows, or making appropriate recommendations and referrals to suitable workplace specialists. Referrals to other professionals could include human resource managers, industrial psychologists or policy experts.

Occupational social workers must prove a return on investment for the business (Orren & Terblanche, 2009). The model presented should be seen as part of a gradual implementation process. Each intervention level should be adopted on a need's basis and on a small pilot scale, where practices can be tested and refined. The model presented closes the micro-meso-macro practice gap and provides innovative ideas and roles for occupational social workers to creatively intervene to assisting youth transition to work.

## **8.7 Conclusion**

The comprehensive occupational social work model presented in this chapter redefines professional practice by integrating solutions across the youth-transition ecosystem, holistically addressing employee and employer needs. According to Austin et al. (2016, p.272), “micro- and macro-practitioners share a common set of crossover skills that are highly valued within organisations and across multiple professional contexts”. This insight from Austin et al. (2016) underscores a central theme of the occupational social work model: the interconnectedness and transferability of skills across different levels of social work practice. Bargal (2000) suggests that occupational social work can minimise the adverse effects of economic changes on employers. To realise this potential, the profession must improve training and establish a strong presence in evolving workplaces (Bargal, 2000).

The model presented in this study challenges the traditional occupational social work professional identity entrenched in neatly defined separate micro, meso and macro-modalities. It also challenges occupational social work to focus on adapting skills and interventions to meet clients' specific and diverse needs. The final chapter synthesises the main research findings into actionable insights, highlighting the key contributions and recommendations that can transform

how organisations can create supportive mechanisms for youth transition and how South African occupational social workers can make a meaningful and impactful change in workplace settings.



## CHAPTER NINE

### Summary of Findings, Recommendations, Contributions, and

### Concluding Comments

#### 9.1 Introduction

This research report explored the dynamics at the youth-organisation interface. The study examined the meaning of youth employees' experiences from a phenomenological perspective and explored the perspectives of key stakeholders representing the call centre organisations. In the subsequent sections, I analysed how the study's primary aim and secondary objectives were achieved. This chapter provides an overview of the study and examines its limitations, contributions, and proposes potential opportunities for further research.

#### 9.2 Overview of the Study

A qualitative approach, utilising semi-structured interviews, was used to gain insight into the organisational data. This data provided organisational context for the youth's experiences and how they are situated in relation to organisational dynamics, needs, and resources. The sample consisted of 20 youths and 12 organisational professionals from five different organisations. The combination of youth and organisational professionals provided a unique lens into the interface issues that marginalised youth experience in their transition to work.

The study answered four main research questions: 1) What are the **transition experiences of marginalised youth** within the organisations in which they are employed? 2)

What are the **views of human resources professionals and supervisors/managers** who work with marginalised youth transitioning to work? 3) What are the **views of BPO industry leaders** regarding the dynamics that exist at the youth organisation interface, and **what social innovative methods do they see as contributing to the success of youth-to-work transition?** 4) What are the **factors that need to be considered in a model of practice for occupational social workers** in addressing youth unemployment at the youth-organisation interface? The following section examines the four main objectives and summarises the key findings:

#### **9.2.1. Objective 1: Experiences and conditions for a successful transition to work for marginalised youth**

Objective one explored the experiences, relationships, interactions, and contextual factors identified by youth as they transitioned into work. Participants revealed their experiences and the conditions they faced in five main emergent themes: 1) Youth attributes - hopeful, goal-oriented and open to learning; 2) The role of family and friends; 3) Workplace relationships - the value of peer and team leaders; 4) Appropriateness of the contact centre for marginalised youth; and 5) Youth Perspective - work culture and environment.

##### **9.2.1.1 Positive youth attributes**

**Youth Attributes:** Economic and social challenges notwithstanding, most participants (85%, or 17 of 20) maintained positive, goal-focused attitudes about their careers. The two main youth attributes that emerged from the data was 1) young people's hopeful, goal-oriented disposition, and 2) their openness to learning. Being hopeful and positive and willing to learn are

vital attributes for youth entering the world of work (Baldry et al., 2019; Bray et al., 2010; Meier & Crocker, 2010; Newman & De Lannoy, 2014).

Employers could benefit from young employees' eagerness, which presents an opportunity to build a strong youth talent pipeline and mould youth into high-performing, motivated employees. However, to leverage the youth workforce, workplaces must adapt to meet the needs of a younger demographic at an earlier and developmental stage (Lerner, 2009).

#### **9.2.1.2 The Role of Family and Friends**

**Family support:** The role of family is crucial for young employees, especially single mothers who rely on family members to assist with childcare responsibilities. Seven of the 20 participants (35%) had dependents. Employees receive childcare support from their families and provide much-needed household income. Some youth expressed that their low salary did not match what was 'expected' in the form of black tax to the family, and, as a result, they accumulated debt to meet family obligations. The debt incurred and the lack of financial literacy keep youth in a cycle of poverty. Seventy-five per cent of youth in the study could not fund their studies with their current income. Providing financial aid for young employees to complete their studies is a tangible reward that could help break the job cycle and allow youth to progress in their careers. In addition, financial literacy training could help break the debt cycle that young employees experience.

#### **9.2.1.3 The Role of Peers**

**Peer Support:** Ninety per cent of participants felt a sense of belonging and inclusion through positive peer relationships, which is crucial for youth development, as emphasised by

Maslow's (1943) hierarchy of needs and Bronfenbrenner's (1979) ecological systems theory. In addition, pairing youth with experienced peers in contact centres helps provide a sense of safety and support.

Positive peer relationships are essential for youth development, fulfilling the need for belonging as highlighted by Maslow's hierarchy of needs. Belonging is crucial for human development (Pinkus, 2020). Mowat (2015) points out that marginalisation can lead to feelings of not belonging and the inability to contribute to a community. Youth in call centres cultivate positive social identities associated with their group and peer membership (Tajfel, 1978a; Tajfel, 1978b). The study emphasises the significant role of contact centres and peers in fulfilling the belonging needs, especially for marginalised youth.

#### **9.2.1.4            Role of Team Leaders**

**Positive team leader relationship:** Findings show successful youth transition to employment is closely tied to positive relationships with team leaders. This finding is supported by literature which shows that social capital predicts work-life quality and job satisfaction for marginalised youth more than employee characteristics, organisation, or work environment (Blustein et al., 2023; Jutengren et al., 2020; Requena, 2003).

#### **9.2.1.5            Youth Perspective: Work Culture and Environment**

**Belonging:** Ninety per cent of participants felt a sense of belonging and inclusion through positive peer relationships. The findings align with Rus et al. (2010) who point out that the exo-systems provide a foundation and support for the relationships that develop within them.

In this context, the contact centre functions as an exo-system that creates an environment where inclusion and belongingness needs are met through peer interactions.

**Rewards and Benefits:** The study revealed that contact centres in the present study lacked a complete reward system. Bussin et al. (2019) studied 276 participants across seven South African provinces to identify reward categories influencing youth attraction to organisations. Only three of the seven reward categories Bussin et al. (2019) mentioned were found in this research study.

Contact centres can offer valuable workplace experience for post-secondary school graduates, but more government and educational efforts are needed to ensure sustainable career development support. Baldry (2019) emphasises the importance of educational and career support for young people seeking better opportunities. Employers, governments, and educational institutions should support this by offering subsidies and assistance. While employers' short-term assistance with transport and meals does assist youth, these 'benefits' do not tackle the broader systemic issues causing youth marginalisation. Solutions that offer sustainable assistance to youth and their households need to be addressed by multiple stakeholders.

#### **9.2.1.6 Work Support.**

**Work Readiness:** Eight youth participants reported lacking confidence in transitioning to work, despite participating in a work readiness program. This finding points to the need for more research better to understand the needs of youth and work readiness programs.

**On-the-Job Training:** Findings from the present study show that contact centres support entry-level employees by offering training programs and through entry-level incubation programmes. The incubation programmes have reduced sales targets and include intensive mentoring and coaching support. The research study did not find a direct correlation between incubation programmes and successful transition to work; further research is required to investigate the effectiveness of incubation groups in contact centres. Control group studies will help confirm whether incubation groups yield better results from a business and employee perspective.

**Coaching:** One-to-one coaching significantly increased young people's confidence during their transition to work. Ten participants felt confident and settled in their roles after coaching and gaining experience, emphasising the importance of time, experience, and supportive coaching and training in building confidence.

#### **9.2.1.7 Challenging Work Environment.**

**Micro-aggressions:** Youth experience the dual side of human behaviour in a contact centre. On the one hand, positive peer and team leader interactions build confidence and meet belonging and identity development needs. On the other hand, employees experience rude, verbally abusive customers, with some expressing that they also experience beratement from colleagues. Verbal abuse from customers in the workplace may affect marginalised youths' self-confidence and identity development.

According to Berk (2017), the impact of micro-aggressions on the victims can have a lasting negative effect: contact centre employers and occupational social workers need to

examine the impact of customer micro-aggressions on marginalised youth. As a part of debriefing, self-care interventions and counselling are necessary to mitigate the impact of micro-aggressions. There is a lack of empirical evidence and literature on specific interventions addressing these issues, as well as the impact of micro-aggressions on youth identity development.

#### **9.2.1.8 Socio-Economic Conditions.**

**Social Support:** The study identified three socio-economic challenges faced by youth transitioning to employment: limited financial means, transport and distance to work, and the impact of the COVID-19 pandemic. The study emphasises the struggles of employed youth in breaking the poverty cycle and recommends tailored programs for marginalised youth (Nassar-McMillan et al., 2017). Paulsen and Berg (2016) emphasise the importance of social support in young people's transition from school to work. Interventions and support programs in contact centres mentioned in the study are examples of social support, including meal and transport assistance, which help marginalised youth transition into employment

The contact centre environment is a valuable starting point for entry-level youth from disadvantaged backgrounds. It provides income, belonging, and access to training and mentorship.

## **9.2.2 Objective 2: Part A - Views of Human Resource Personnel and Managers and Part B - Perspectives on BPO Industry Leaders**

The views of organisational participants working with marginalised youth resulted in five themes: 1) BPO sector employee value proposition, 2) workplace culture, 3) viability of employing marginalised youth, 4) youth work transition stages, and 5) team leader traits.

### **9.2.2.1 BPO Sector Employee Value Proposition for Young Employees.**

Negative BPO Reputation: According to the findings, 75% of participants believed that more should be done to enhance the BPO employee value proposition. The contact centre industry has a negative reputation due to high stress levels, burn-out and high rates of attrition (Bhatnagar, 2007; Oshri et al., 2015; Presbitero et al., 2016). There has been a significant increase in academic research on call centres (Burgess, 2006; Holtgrewe et al., 2002), which has helped advance the sector. However, the focus of the literature and research appears to be on operational efficiencies for the benefit of employers, rather than exploring the work environment for the benefit of employees. Participants in the research study pointed to the industry's high attrition rate and job-hopping challenges, which are indicators of a fragile workforce and adverse working conditions.

### **9.2.2.2 Organisation Perspective: Workplace Culture and Environment for Youth.**

Suitability of Contact Centres for Youth: Findings from 50% of the organisation participants indicate that the high-pressure work environment and compressed training timelines



in contact centres may not be suitable for all young employees. Research efforts that examine the profile of young employees suited to a contact centre are needed.

There are mixed views about the contact centre as a suitable environment for youth, with three participants (25%) raising concerns that youth who enter the environment ‘get stuck’. The concept of being 'stuck' in a contact centre refers to the situation where individuals are unable to find alternate employment and are unable to progress or develop within the contact centre. Being ‘stuck’ has significant implications for the career growth and earning potential of young employees. Six organisation participants (50%) held a different opinion and believed that there were in fact growth opportunities within the sector. They highlighted success stories of employees who had progressed into team leader and management roles through talent development programs. Future research can help researchers understand the factors contributing to these divergent outcomes. Longitudinal or comparative research studies could be instrumental in shedding light on these complexities.

#### **9.2.2.3 The Viability of Employing Marginalised Youth.**

**Employing Marginalised Youth:** Marginalised youth are highly motivated and eager to learn. Employers in research study prefer inexperienced youth over older workers because it is believed that youth tend to stay in the workplace for longer periods. However, all participants (100%) agreed that marginalised youth lack workplace skills and require assistance with work readiness programs. The main skill gaps identified were digital, typing, and language skills, along with understanding workplace expectations and norms.

Participants acknowledged the presence and importance of EAP's in the workplace, but agreed that the service was under-utilised. This under-utilisation may be due to cultural attitudes towards therapy and reluctance to use tele-therapy, which is the main means of EAP service delivery. Dimoff and Kelloway (2017) suggest that adjusting EAPs and workplace interventions can increase use of support services.

There is a disconnect between EAPs and employee needs, with EAPs providing only limited micro-intervention support. Occupational social workers can enhance the EAPs by providing a macro-lens and broader perspective through focusing on structural and systemic issues within the workplace. This approach can result in more effective and impactful support for employees.

### **9.2.3            Objective 3 - Youth Transition to Employment: An Occupational Social Work Model**

The Occupational Social Work model developed from the study's findings offers a unique perspective that includes both the experiences and needs of employees and employers' views. This is aligned with the study's objective, which was to examine youth-to-work interface issues.

The youth transition to work journey was mapped across four transition stages: recruitment and hiring →, training and development→, induction and onboarding, and the → employment phase. Multi-level occupational social work practice interventions were mapped across the four transition stages to meet the needs of youth employees and organisations. The occupational social work practice interventions were developed to be interrelated; each intervention leads into and feeds off each other: micro↔meso↔macro. The findings of youth

participants and organisation participants, representing human resources, managers and BPO experts, culminated in developing the occupational social work model. The value and the recognition of the needs of employees and employers, combined with the multi-layered occupational social work skill set, were matched in developing this youth-to-work occupational social work practice model.

The development of a model of practice for occupational social workers is a practice guide for practitioners and organisations to create more supportive and inclusive environments for young employees. Furthermore, the research highlights innovative social practices within the occupational social work and BPO sector, underscoring the significance of tailored and innovative solutions for facilitating the transition of marginalised youth into the workforce.

### **9.3 Main Contributions**

The study's main contribution is expanding traditional occupational social work intervention to capture the complex, interactive and contextual interface issues that affect the youth-to-work transition. The study's findings have implications for policymakers, organisations, and practitioners seeking to support the successful transition of marginalised youth into the workforce. The following section expands on the multi-disciplinary approach; particular attention will be paid to the occupational social work contribution in the BPO field.

#### **9.3.1 Multi-Disciplinary Contribution**

The study's interdisciplinary approach reflects the growing recognition among scholars of the need for collaboration across academic disciplines to address complex social issues. Drawing on multiple academic disciplines, including occupational social work, psychology, sociology,

youth development, organisation and business management, and human resource management, allows for a comprehensive examination of the dynamics at the youth-organisation interface. The study's findings have significant academic value, contributing to the growth and development of cross-disciplinary collaboration in addressing youth-work interface issues. The study's multi-disciplinary approach highlights the need for collaboration between scholars with different areas of expertise to solve complex social issues such as youth unemployment. The study findings reinforce the importance of interdisciplinary collaboration in conducting research that has practical implications for addressing social problems.

The research study's contribution is in line with the social justice aims of the Department of Social Development (2020), which outlines that occupational social work services are essential in promoting an inclusive and just work environment. The policy contributions advance the advocacy, and human capital aims in the workplace. This includes developing work experience programmes and recruitment, training, and onboarding policies and programmes. It informs future youth hiring and employment support practices and contributes to developing youth-friendly organisational practices.

### **9.3.2 Occupational Social Work Contribution**

Mor Barak (1999) argues that for occupational social work to gain the recognition it deserves, there needs to be a solid professional identity, a research-based theoretical foundation, recognition by professional organisations, and a more clearly defined niche of professional specialisation. The research study contributes to the occupational social work foundation that Mor Barak (1999) advocates for, highlighting the potential of specialised practice for marginalised youth. The study's significant contribution is its multi-level practice intervention

model, adding to the discourse through a specialised youth intervention focus, organisational emphasis, community engagement, and proposed specialised employment intervention frameworks.

The model presents advanced practice solutions by focusing on marginalised youth, recognising their unique challenges and opportunities. Crucial skill development areas such as financial literacy, workplace communication, and stress management are emphasised. The model focuses on individual workers and organisational interventions, including cultural sensitivity training for recruiters and supportive coaching for trainers and team leads, in order to better support marginalised employees.

Community engagement is an essential component integrated into the practice model, including elements such as impact sourcing and community mentorship programs, which acknowledge the significance of community involvement in achieving successful youth employment outcomes.

### **9.3.3 Contributions to the BPO Sector**

The study could improve youth hiring and support practices and contribute to developing youth-friendly organisational practices. Enhancing the employee-supervisor relationship is valuable when it comes to youth-to-work transition. The study provides supervisors with insight into unique factors associated with a marginalised youth workforce, potentially leading to a supervisor training program. Employers should focus on training and preparing young employees for long-term career development. Contact centres need clear career paths for the industry to remain a preferred workplace.

Contact centres benefit young employees by helping them develop communication, customer service, engagement, and project management skills. Contact centre training and support interventions assist youth in adapting to work and closing the skills gap caused by an inadequate education system (Graham et al., 2019a; Mouton et al., 2012). A standardised work readiness programme supported by the industry bodies would give credibility to employment opportunities for marginalised youth outside the profession.

Coaching programmes, peer mentoring, and buddy systems are recommended to build skills effectively. Onboarding and workplace socialisation were present in all organisations and viewed as critical to a successful transition for new hires. Nesting and incubation programmes are recommended to benefit marginalised youth, but in-depth research on the methodology is lacking. On-the-job training is highlighted as an essential theme, and attention should be given to implementing it effectively.

#### **9.3.4 Contribution to Understanding the Youth-Work Interface and Future Research Opportunities**

The study's qualitative design and exploratory nature led to many emerging opportunities for further research and study. Johansson (2017) points out a gap in youth studies by thoroughly exploring the interconnections between social and cultural positions and the roles of class and ethnicity. To further address the empirical and theoretical gaps, I would be interested in investigating future studies in the following areas:

**Improving youth employment standards:** There is a lack of empirical studies on decent work in contact centres. The ILO's definition of decent work should be considered when protecting and advocating for quality work opportunities for the youth. Research into a decent work youth framework for contact centres is needed in order to standardise and benchmark good youth employment practices, ensuring more equitable employment conditions. Additionally, the research conducted for decent work in the BPO sector could be applied to other youth-employment sectors.

**Rewards and Benefits Framework:** Comprehensive research is needed to understand the impact of rewards on employee behaviour and outcomes in contact centres. A mixed-methods study that analyses existing literature and investigates specific reward packages would provide valuable insights for improving employee performance, satisfaction, and retention in the BPO sector.

**Career Progression:** Further research on being 'stuck' and 'career progression' within a contact centre is required. Longitudinal research focused on tracking marginalised youth career development can help policymakers and employers understand what interventions are needed to promote employee and employer growth. In addition, evidence-based policies and strategies are needed to improve the conditions for a youth workforce.

**Understanding coping mechanisms of marginalised youth:** Further research is required on the relationship between resilience and individual agency as an adaptive coping mechanism for marginalised youth. Little is known about how a sales environment with tight

targets impacts youth's sense of identity and development. Researching the connection between marginalised youth in sales, their identity, resilience, and the concept of ubuntu in South Africa would help us understand if a contact centre would suit young people.

**Youth entitlement:** A strong theme in the research is the employers' view that employees present as entitled. Exploring the link between marginalisation and entitlement can provide a deeper understanding of entitlement and its impact on youth. By examining these concepts, we could understand how perceived entitlement plays out in the lives of marginalised young people transitioning to employment.

**Team Leader Effect:** Findings show a positive relationship between the connection with team leaders and feelings of confidence and readiness for work. An empirical quantitative study is needed to understand better the relationship dynamics between marginalised youth employees and their team leaders.

**On-the-Job Training:** Research is needed to investigate the effectiveness of nesting or incubation groups in contact centres for supporting youth transitioning to employment. Findings from the study indicate that youth could benefit from the slow transition and high touch support that the incubation groups offer. Conducting control group studies could help establish their efficacy.

## **9.4 Limitations**

**Broad Scope of the Study:** The study examines a broad subject scope, including multiple levels of social work intervention and complex interpersonal and work-related



experiences. On the one hand, the broad scope presents a limitation in that sufficient depth in some areas could not be covered. However, on the other hand, the broad scope and diverse topics covered in the research provide a suitable launch pad for occupational social work researchers to continue building on the foundation this study has laid.

**Focus on Marginalised Youth:** The study's strength is its focus on marginalised youth transitioning to the workplace. The phenomenological emphasis on the felt experiences of youth contributes to an under-researched area of study and aids in providing much-needed youth advocacy.

**Small Sample Size:** A further limitation of the study is the small sample size of participants. The study included 20 youth participants and 12 organisation participants, which may limit the generalisability of the findings to larger populations. Additionally, the study was conducted in Kwa-Zulu Natal, a specific geographic location that may limit the generalisability of the findings to other regions or countries.

**Qualitative research focus:** The subjective nature of qualitative data and the potential for researcher bias in interpretation must be considered. While efforts were made to ensure a diverse sample, the generalisability of findings to all contexts and populations of marginalised youth may be limited due to the inherently focused nature of qualitative research.

**Limited interview scope:** Another limitation of the study was excluding questions about the presence of unions in contact centres. This omission could have contributed to a better understanding of alternate forms of support and advocacy that are available. Another notable

limitation of the study was the omission of additional questions to management on rewards and benefits structures, which limits the detail needed to understand the youth-work interface better. Including these questions in a mixed-method study would be beneficial in providing more customised feedback on a rewards framework for the BPO sector.

**Phenomenological Bias:** While phenomenological interpretivism offers rich depth in understanding individuals' experiences, it also has inherent limitations. Interpretivist research is often guided by the researcher's beliefs and feelings about the world, potentially impacting the study's understanding and interpretation (Guba & Lincoln, 2005). However, combining the findings from the phenomenological research conducted in this present study with other research methods could address this limitation in the future.

**Online Data Collection:** Data collection for this study took place during the COVID-19 pandemic. Collecting data in this manner limited participants' access during this period. It meant that most interviews had to be conducted via Zoom, a virtual meeting platform, with only a few in-person interviews conducted once government meetings and work regulations allowed for this. A limitation of Zoom is that, at times, it presented technical difficulties, resulting in delayed meeting starts and challenges with audio and connectivity. A strength of having online interviews was that the adaptability and flexibility of the researcher and the research approach this allowed for the study to continue despite challenging set of circumstances. Online data collection also inadvertently strengthened the study in that participants who may have been unable to take part in the study due to it being in person were now able to participate in the study.

**The Functionality of the Data Analysis Programme:** Dedoose, the web-based data analysis programme, was, for the most part, hugely helpful; however, the system crashed on more than one occasion, resulting in delays in the data analysis process. I also experienced challenges uploading recordings and transcripts; receiving online support was time-consuming and resulted in further delays. Utilising Dedoose, however, strengthened the overall study as it enhanced the study's credibility and the reproducibility.

**Researcher's Positionality:** The researcher's age and position may have limited the youth component of the study. Establishing trust and rapport and confirming confidentiality ensured participants could speak freely about their workplace conditions, relationships and experiences. Ongoing member checking was conducted to ensure understanding and alignment regarding this concern.

## **9.5 Conclusion**

In conclusion, the research study has contributed to the academic discourse by examining the complex dynamics at the youth-organisation interface and the challenges marginalised youth face in transition to work. Through a combination of systems and structuration theory and a phenomenological approach, the findings have resulted in a model of practice for occupational social workers and highlighted the need for a holistic systems view of marginalised youth.

The study's findings advance understanding of marginalised youth workplace transitions in ways that have both theoretical significance and practical applicability. By focusing specifically on marginalised youth, this research addresses gaps in the existing literature and highlights the need for targeted approaches to workplace integration and support.

The study's contributions have the potential to inform policy and practice, ultimately leading to more effective workplace support for marginalised youth. Specifically, the findings highlight the critical importance of peer and team leader support as essential components of workplace transition. This finding suggests that organisations prioritise cultural and relational elements, such as creating a welcoming environment and coaching and mentoring relationships that ultimately bridge the knowledge gap and foster a sense of belonging. Additionally, the research underscores the need for customised, creative, and innovative solutions that address challenges unique to marginalised youth's transitions.

#### **9.5.1 Final remarks**

Occupational social workers can support employer-employee engagement initiatives and bring about organisational changes. To adapt to the changing world of work, occupational social work must embrace a new mindset and explore new roles and functions that the profession can serve (Mor Barak, 1999). While maintaining the principles of occupational social work, professionals must let go of rigid professional titles and naming conventions that may hinder their perceived value in the workplace. By actively engaging with the issues that need to be addressed and taking on new roles across the practice divide, occupational social workers can open up a world of opportunities for the profession and better serve the needs of individuals in the workforce.

Freire (2000) remarks that what distinguishes professional skills from others is the capacity for reflection in the midst of action. This research is an example of reflection in the midst of action, and it is hoped that the findings in this report will continue to build on the

occupational social work skill set. Reisch (2013) calls for social workers to reconceptualise their relationships to the state, the market service users and the community.

The process of transitioning from unemployment to employment is a profoundly important phenomenon that warrants further in-depth research. The experiences of all youth in this study have had an impact on how I view youth's work transition experience. However, the sentiments from P:19 has had a lasting impact on how I feel about youth's lived reality. The participant describes her experience as follows:

“Transitioning to work is a huge achievement. You finally feel like you're equal in society; you feel proud of yourself. You have value” (P:19)

On the one hand, I celebrate the achievement that the transition to employment has given this participant. However, on the other hand, I am reminded of the unemployed millions who are stuck with feelings of not belonging to society, of not seeing their worth and value. This stark reality serves as a compelling call to action for all professionals to push back the tide of unemployment by contributing innovative solutions for youth transitioning to employment.

The occupational social work practice model presented in this study demonstrates practical reconceptualisation for the profession and suggests innovative roles that can aid in offering hope and practical direction to successfully bridge the youth-to-work divide.

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## **APPENDICES**

### **Appendix A**

#### **Participant Information Sheet – Recently Employed Youth**

##### **Title of the Project:**

A multi-perspective study of youth transition to employment: Exploring the South African youth-organisation interface

Dear Sir/Madam,

My name is Maxine Dorkin, and I am a PhD student in Social Work at Wits University in Johannesburg. As part of my studies, I have to undertake a research project. I am investigating youth transition to employment by exploring experiences of youth and management in South African organisations from an occupational social work perspective.

The aim of this research project is to explore the dynamics that exist at the youth-organisation interface and a potential model of practice for occupational social workers in South African workplaces. The research study will explore the unique opportunities and challenges at the youth organisation interface from the perspective of employers and employees. I shall obtain



the perspectives from four different segments in the organisation which will include youth, supervisors/managers, human resource managers and BPO industry experts.

As part of this project, I would like to invite you to take part in an interview. I will be asking you questions about your experiences of unemployment and transition to employment. The semi-structured interview will be 45 - 60 minutes. With your permission I may contact you for a second 30 minute follow up interview, should further clarity be required. With your permission, I would like to record the interview/s using a digital device and use verbatim quotations in the write-up of this study.

You will not receive any direct benefits from participating in this study, and there are no disadvantages or penalties for not participating. You may withdraw at any time and refrain from answering any question you do not want to answer. I will be using a pseudonym (false name) to represent your participation in my final research report.

If you experience any distress or discomfort, we will stop the interview or resume another time. If you need some support or counselling services following the interview, this will be available free of charge. The name of the counsellor is Sibongile Mkhize and the contact details for the counselling service are 0823165478.

If you have any questions during or afterwards about this research, feel free to contact me on the details listed below. This study will be written up as a research report which will be available online through the university library website. The data collected will be stored on a

password-protected computer. Following the completion of the research study, the data collected will be stored in a secure safe and will be kept for five years.

If you have any concerns or complaints regarding the ethical procedures of this study, you are welcome to contact the University Human Research Ethics Committee (Non-Medical), telephone +27(0) 11 717 1408, email [hrecnon-medical@wits.ac.za](mailto:hrecnon-medical@wits.ac.za).

Yours sincerely,

Researcher, Maxine Dorkin

Telephone, +27834553075, email: [0511662f@students.wits.ac.za](mailto:0511662f@students.wits.ac.za)

Supervisor, Dr. Francine Masson Telephone, (011) 7174480, email, [Francine.Masson@wits.ac.za](mailto:Francine.Masson@wits.ac.za)



## Appendix B

### Youth Consent Form

#### Title of project:

A multi-perspective study of youth transition to employment: Exploring the South African youth-organisation interface.

Name of researcher: Maxine Dorkin

I, ....., agree to participate in this research project. The research has been explained to me and I understand what my participation will involve. I agree to the following:

Please tick the relevant options below

I agree that my participation will remain anonymous.

YES ☐

NO ☐

I agree that the researcher may use anonymous quotes in his / her research report.

YES ☐

NO ☐

I agree that the interview may be audio recorded.

YES ☐

NO ☐

I agree that the information I provide may be used anonymously after this project has ended, for academic purposes by other researchers, subject to their own ethics clearance being obtained.

YES ☐

NO ☐

..... (signature)

..... (name of participant)

..... (date)

..... (signature)

..... (name of person seeking consent)

..... (date)



## **Appendix C**

### **Semi-Structured Interview Schedule - Recently Employed Youth**

#### **Title of project:**

A multi-perspective study of youth transition to employment: Exploring the South African youth-organisation interface.

Researcher: Maxine Dorkin

#### **Introduction:**

Kindly complete this consent form. I am available to answer any questions relating to the consent forms and interview that you may have. The interview should last no longer than an hour and will be recorded using a Dictaphone. There are no right or wrong answers to the question. I am interested in your experiences and thoughts. While I may ask a few questions during the interview, I am interested in what you want to say and what has been important for you. I will spend just a few minutes going through the consent form with you.

#### **Demographics**

Age.....

Gender.....

Marital Status.....

Educational Qualifications.....

Name of School.....

How long were you seeking employment?.....

Interview Questions:

Tell me about your current employment?

**Prompts:**

**Recruitment Phase:**

Tell me about your experiences transitioning from unemployment to employment?

As a new employee, how would you describe your experiences during the recruitment phase?

What do you understand the role of the human resources department to be?

Are there any challenges that you faced in the employment process? If, so please elaborate.

**Employment Phase:**

Can you describe what it felt like in the first few weeks of work?

What has your employment experience been like in the past 3 months?

Can you tell me about the work transition support that you have received or did not receive from your Manager/Supervisor?

Can you tell me about the work transition support that you received or did not receive from the Human Resource Department?

Can you tell me about the work transition support that you received or did not receive from your peers?

What did you find worked well in your journey to employment?

What is life like for you now that you are employed?

What would your ideal work environment be like?

Can you describe the type of work environment that you would like or have experienced that will assist your transition to work?

### **Relationships in the workplace?**

What relationships have you found to be most supportive/impactful in the workplace?

How would you describe the relationships you have with your peers/colleagues?

How would you describe your relationship with your supervisor/manager

## Appendix D

### Participant Information Sheet – Human Resource Professionals

#### Title of the Project:

A multi-perspective study of youth transition to employment: Exploring the South African youth-organisation interface.

Dear Sir/Madam,

My name is Maxine Dorkin, and I am a PhD student in Social Work at the University of Witwatersrand, Johannesburg. As part of my studies, I have to undertake a research project, that entails investigating youth transition to employment by exploring experiences of youth and management in South Africa.

The aim of this research project is to explore the dynamics that exist at the youth-organisation interface and a potential model of practice for occupational social workers in South African workplaces. The research study will explore the unique opportunities and challenges at the youth organisation interface from the perspective of employers and employees. I shall obtain



the perspectives from four different segments in the organisation which will include youth, supervisors/managers, human resource managers and BPO industry experts.

As part of this project, I would like to invite you to take part in an interview. I will be asking you questions about your experiences working with recently employed youth as a Human Resource Professional. The semi-structured interview will be 45mins - 60 mins. With your permission and should further clarity be required I may contact you for a second 30 min follow up interview. With your permission, I would like to record the interview using a digital device and use verbatim quotations in the write up of this study.

There will be no personal costs to you if you participate in this project, you will not receive any direct benefits from participation, but there are no disadvantages or penalties if you do not choose to participate or if you withdraw from the study. The interview will be completely confidential and anonymous as I will not be asking for your name or any identifying information, and the information you give to me will be held securely and not disclosed to anyone else.

I will be using a pseudonym (false name) to represent your participation in my final research report.

If you have any questions during or afterwards about this research, feel free to contact me on the details listed below. This study will be written up as a research report which will be available online through the university library website. The data collected will be stored on a password protected computer. Following the completion of the research study, the data collected will be stored in a secure safe and will be kept for five years. If you have any concerns or

complaints regarding the ethical procedures of this study, you are welcome to contact the University Human Research Ethics Committee (Non-Medical), telephone +27(0) 11 717 1408, email [hrecnonmedical@wits.ac.za](mailto:hrecnonmedical@wits.ac.za)

Yours sincerely,

Researcher, Maxine Dorkin

Telephone, +27834553075, email: 0511662f@students.wits.ac.za

Supervisor, Dr. Francine Masson

Telephone, (011) 7174480, email, [Francine.Masson@wits.ac.za](mailto:Francine.Masson@wits.ac.za)



## Appendix E

### Human Resource Professionals Consent Form

#### Title of project:

A multi-perspective study of youth transition to employment: Exploring the South African youth-organisation interface.

Name of researcher: Maxine Dorkin

I, ....., agree to participate in this research project. The research has been explained to me and I understand what my participation will involve. I agree to the following:

(Please tick the relevant options below).

I agree that my participation will remain anonymous

YES ☐

NO ☐

I agree that the researcher may use anonymous quotes in his / her research report

YES ☐

NO ☐

I agree that the interview may be audio recorded

YES ☐

NO ☐

I agree that the information I provide may be used anonymously after this project has ended, for academic purposes by other researchers, subject to their own ethics clearance being obtained.

YES ☐

NO ☐

..... (signature)

..... (name of participant)

..... (date)

..... (signature)

..... (name of person seeking consent)

..... (date)

## **Appendix F**

Semi -structured interview schedule: Human Resource Professionals

### **Title of project:**

A multi-perspective study of youth transition to employment: Exploring the South African youth-organisation interface.

Researcher: Maxine Dorkin

### **Introduction:**

Kindly complete this consent form. I am available to answer any questions relating to the consent forms and interview that you may have. The interview should last no longer than an hour and will be recorded using a Dictaphone. There are no right or wrong answers to the question. I am interested in your experiences and thoughts. While I may ask a few questions during the interview, I am interested in what you want to say and what has been important for you. I will spend just a few minutes going through the consent form with you.

### **Demographic Information**

Age.....

Gender.....

Highest level of education attained.....

Occupation.....

Number of years work experience.....

Number of years working with youth employees

**Interview Question:**

What are your experiences recruiting & working with youth from previously disadvantaged backgrounds?

**Prompts:**

**Recruitment Process:**

In your own words what would you describe as the ideal induction programme to assist youth as they transition to employment? Can you describe the recruitment process that your organisation employs when recruiting first time job seekers? What types of recruitment policies do you think will assist in employing first time job seekers?

**Organisation Perspective**

What are your experiences employing youth through the Employee Incentive Tax Policy?

In your view, what are the most pressing issues youth experience as they transition to employment? What type of work environment in your view will make the work transition for youths smooth? Does your organisation have any youth specific policy or practices in place?

## **Relationship in the Workplace**

What types of work relationships have you observed assist youth in their transition to employment? What experiences have you had or observed with youth in their interaction with the Human Resource department? What experiences have you had or observed with youth in their interaction with their Managers/Supervisors?

What in your view would be the ideal components of a youth specific mentorship programme?

What characteristics do you think an effective Manager/Supervisor working with young people should have?

## **Occupational Social Work?**

Have you heard of the specialty of occupational social work, and have you ever worked with occupational social workers?

If yes, what do you understand is the role of occupational social workers working with recently employed youth?

## **Appendix G**

### **Participant Information Sheet – Managers and Supervisors**

#### **Title of the project:**

A multi-perspective study of youth transition to employment: Exploring the South African youth-organisation interface.

Dear Sir/Madam,

My name is Maxine Dorkin, and I am a PhD student in Social Work at the University of Witwatersrand, Johannesburg. As part of my studies, I have to undertake a research project that entails investigating youth transition to employment by exploring experiences of youth and management in South Africa.

The aim of this research project is to explore the dynamics that exist at the youth-organisation interface and a potential model of practice for occupational social workers in South African workplaces. The research study will explore the unique opportunities and challenges at the youth organisation interface from the perspective of employers and employees. I shall obtain the perspectives from four different segments in the organisation which will include youth, supervisors/managers, human resource managers and BPO industry experts.



As part of this project, I would like to invite you to take part in an interview. I will be asking you questions about your experiences working with recently employed youth. The semi-structured interview will be 45mins - 60 mins. With your permission and should further clarity be required I may contact you for a second 30 min follow up interview. With your permission, I would like to record the interview using a digital device and use verbatim quotations in the write up of this study.

There will be no personal costs to you if you participate in this project, you will not receive any direct benefits from participation, but there are no disadvantages or penalties if you do not choose to participate or if you withdraw from the study.

The interview will be completely confidential and anonymous as I will not be asking for your name or any identifying information, and the information you give to me will be held securely and not disclosed to anyone else. I will be using a pseudonym (false name) to represent your participation in my final research report.

If you have any questions during or afterwards about this research, feel free to contact me on the details listed below. This study will be written up as a research report which will be available online through the university library website.

The data collected will be stored on a password protected computer. Following the completion of the research study, the data collected will be stored in a secure safe and will be kept for five years. If you have any concerns or complaints regarding the ethical procedures of

this study, you are welcome to contact the University Human Research Ethics Committee (Non-Medical), telephone +27(0) 11 717 1408, email [hrecnon-medical@wits.ac.za](mailto:hrecnon-medical@wits.ac.za).

Yours sincerely,

Researcher, Maxine Dorkin

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Supervisor, Dr. Francine Masson

Telephone, (011) 7174480, email, [Francine.Masson@wits.ac.za](mailto:Francine.Masson@wits.ac.za)



## Appendix H

### Managers and Supervisors Consent Form

#### Title of project:

A multi-perspective study of youth transition to employment: Exploring the South African youth-organisation interface.

Name of researcher: Maxine Dorkin

I, ....., agree to participate in this research project. The research has been explained to me and I understand what my participation will involve. I agree to the following:

(Please tick the relevant options below).

I agree that my participation will remain anonymous.

YES ☐

NO ☐

I agree that the researcher may use anonymous quotes in his / her research report.

YES ☐

NO ☐

I agree that the interview may be audio recorded.

YES ☐

NO ☐

I agree that the information I provide may be used anonymously after this project has ended, for academic purposes by other researchers, subject to their own ethics clearance being obtained.

YES ☐

NO ☐

..... (signature)

..... (name of participant)

..... (date)

..... (signature)

..... (name of person seeking consent)

..... (date)



## **Appendix I**

Semi-structured interview schedule: Managers and Supervisors

### **Title of project:**

A multi-perspective study of youth transition to employment: Exploring the South African youth-organisation interface.

Researcher: Maxine Dorkin

### **Demographic Information**

Age.....

Gender.....

Highest level of education attained.....

Occupation.....

Number of years work experience.....

Number of years working with youth employees

### **Prompts**

Experiences working with Recently Employed Youth

What have your experiences been working with youth?

What would make your work with young people easier?

## **Organisation**

What exists in your organisation to support young people transition to work?

What in the environment makes the transition difficult? What work environment will make the transition to work smooth for youth?

Do you know if your organisation has youth centric systems/policies?

Can you describe the systems/policies that exist in your organisations?

What types of systems/policies do you think should be put in place to enable a smooth transition to work? What types of systems/policies in organisations could potentially make the transition to work challenging?

## **Relationships**

What types of work relationships have you observed assist youth in their transition to employment?

What is your understanding of mentorship programmes for youth?

What characteristics do you think an effective Manager/Supervisor working with young people should have?

## **Occupational Social Work**

Have you heard of the speciality of occupational social work?

If yes to 12, have you ever worked with occupational social workers?

If yes to 12, what do you understand as the role of occupational social workers working with recently employed youth?



## Appendix J

### Participant Information Sheet – Key Informants from the BPO Sector

#### Title of the Project:

A multi-perspective study of youth transition to employment: Exploring the South African youth-organisation interface.

Dear Sir/Madam,

My name is Maxine Dorkin, and I am a PhD student in Social Work at Wits University in Johannesburg. As part of my studies, I have to undertake a research project that entails investigating youth transition to employment by exploring experiences of youth and management in South Africa.

The aim of this research project is to explore the dynamics that exist at the youth-organisation interface and a potential model of practice for occupational social workers in South African workplaces. The research study will explore the unique opportunities and challenges at

the youth organisation interface from the perspective of employers and employees. I shall obtain the perspectives from four different segments in the organisation which will include youth, supervisors/managers, human resource managers and BPO industry experts.

As part of this project, I would like to invite you to take part in an interview. I will be asking you questions about your experiences as an industry expert in the BPO sector. The semi-structured interview will be 45 mins - 60 mins. With your permission and should further clarity be required I may contact you for a 30 min follow up interview. With your permission, I would like to record the interview/s using a digital device and use verbatim quotations in the write up of this study.

You will not receive any direct benefits from participating in this study, and there are no disadvantages or penalties for not participating. You may withdraw at any time and refrain from answering any question you do not want to answer. If you have any questions during or afterwards about this research, feel free to contact me on the details listed below. This study will be written up as a research report which will be available online through the university library website. If you wish to receive a summary of this report, I will be happy to send it to you. The data collected will be stored on a password protected computer. Following the completion of the research study, the data collected will be stored in a secure safe and will be kept for five years. With your permission the data collected from this research project may be used by other researchers. If you have any concerns or complaints regarding the ethical procedures of this study, you are welcome to contact the University Human Research Ethics Committee (Non-Medical), telephone +27(0) 11 717 1408, email [hrecnon-medical@wits.ac.za](mailto:hrecnon-medical@wits.ac.za)



Yours sincerely,

Researcher, Maxine Dorkin

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Supervisor, Dr. Francine Masson

Telephone, (011) 7174480, email, Francine.Masson@wits.ac.za

## **Appendix K**

Key Informants from the BPO Sector: Consent Form

### **Title of project:**

A multi-perspective study of youth transition to employment: Exploring the South African youth-organisation interface.

Name of researcher: Maxine Dorkin

I, ..... agree to participate in this research project. The research has been explained to me and I understand what my participation will involve. I agree to the following:

Please tick the relevant options below:

I agree that my participation will remain anonymous

YES ☐

NO ☐

I agree that the researcher may use anonymous quotes in his / her research report

YES ☐

NO ☐

I agree that the interview may be audio recorded.

YES ☐

NO ☐

I agree that the information I provide may be used after this project has ended, for academic purposes by other researchers, subject to their own ethics clearance being obtained.

YES ☐

NO ☐

..... (signature)

..... (name of participant)

..... (date)

..... (signature)

..... (name of person seeking consent)

..... (date)



## **Appendix L**

### **Semi-Structured Interview Schedule: BPO Industry Leaders**

#### **Title of project:**

A multi-perspective study of youth transition to employment: Exploring the South African youth-organisation interface.

Researcher: Maxine Dorkin Introduction:

Kindly complete this consent form. I am available to answer any questions relating to the consent forms and interview that you may have. The interview should last no longer than an hour and will be recorded using a Dictaphone. There are no right or wrong answers to the question. I am interested in your experiences and thoughts. While I may ask a few questions during the interview, I am interested in what you want to say and what has been important for you. I will spend just a few minutes going through the consent form with you.

#### **Demographic Information:**

Age.....

Gender.....

Highest level of education attained.....

Occupation.....

Number of years work experience.....

Number of years working in the BPO sector....

Interview Question: Tell me about your experience working in the BPO sector?

Prompts:

What is your experience working with youth in the BPO sector?

In your experience what opportunities exist in the BPO sector to address youth unemployment?

What is your understanding of social innovation?

Do you think social innovation is needed in addressing the youth to work transition? If yes, can you elaborate on this further?

What types of social innovation processes are needed in the BPO sector

Have you heard of the speciality of occupational social work? Yes or No

If yes, what type of work have you done with occupational social workers?

If yes to 6, what do you understand as the role of occupational social workers?

## **Appendix M: Youth Journal Entries**

Title: Youth Participant 1

Youth participant one is a resilient and determined young lady. She shows hunger and determination. She is motivated to be independent. She is the oldest of 4 siblings and has a great relationship with her mother. She presents as independent and very strong. She has worked in the Call Centre industry for 3.5 years now. She is an excellent example of being resilient. She started studying Electrical Engineering, which is a sought-after area of study, but she was unable to complete it. This again shows that youth with all the right qualifications and characteristics who don't have networks and funding miss opportunities. Despite being unable to find employment, N didn't let this hold her back. Her friend told her about the job opportunity. She used the Indeed platform and told all her friends about the opportunities available through Indeed. Youth show that even though they don't have formal networks, they have peer networks. She also had a very supportive home environment. She also presents as mature and willing to ask for help. The Call Centres provided her with a lot of support. Resilience is a strong theme; things didn't work out as planned for her studies, but she chose a different path with a brave and fresh attitude. She shows ambition, is looking for her next opportunity, and constantly wants to improve herself. She was prepared to change paths and direction by looking at other career options. Earning money to survive drives her, and assisting the family is a big motivator.

She felt welcomed and had a strong sense of belonging. She found the workplace friendly and built solid, strong relationships at work. The core components of what she enjoys about her current workplace are the relationships she has built.

She explained that she was ‘overlooked’ for a training opportunity as she felt her manager at the time prioritised a certain race group for the training. She had no evidence to support this and decided not to challenge this. Firstly, she didn’t know how to and felt she might have been further ostracised if she was seen as a troublemaker. Even though she encountered what she calls racism in the workplace, she was able to navigate through this.

There is a sense of community support and affirmation from people around her—she mentioned that people around her were proud of what she achieved. She had a strong bond with a team member, and this connection helped her face challenges and deal with difficulties. She speaks of youth wanting everything on a silver platter. N shows a lot of self-awareness. She sees patience as the characteristic that made her stick through it all. The workplace is a microcosm of society, and whatever exists in society also exists in the workplace. People bring societal issues into the place. Work-life and society are not separate but intertwined.

#### Title: Youth Participant 2

Youth 2 had a challenging time at work, finding it very stressful. She lost weight. She found the transition challenging from the logistics, such as transport, to the toll that shift work took. She first worked in a big call centre and transitioned to a smaller one. She found the smaller call centre better. She spoke of mixed emotions, being nervous because she felt she had much to learn. She said she watched people leave and not come back. She spoke of doubting herself. Youth Participant 2 looked after her siblings as her mother worked out of town. She spoke of needing to work in a call centre as she didn’t have very many other options. She enjoys

good relations with her peers and managers. She speaks of the smaller call centre being a better, more welcoming, and more conducive environment for her.

#### Title: Youth Participant 3

Youth 3 was a well-spoken, confident young woman. She completed her Social Science degree. She said she would love a job in the field that she studied in. She enjoyed independence and said she would continue working because she doesn't like being broke. She said jobs in Call Centres were easy to access. She decided to work while studying online. This says a lot about her hunger for work and independence. She fell pregnant during Covid. I am curious about how many young people fell pregnant during the Covid period. She has worked in 3 Call centres. She got a referral for this role from a friend. There is a short turnaround time between application, interview and the training period. Typically, the hiring process takes about two weeks. Or at least that is what Youth 3 described. The application and interview process takes the whole day, though. She informed me that she waited the entire day. She described her first work experience as pleasant; she says she always wanted to work and earn and wondered why some youth are so hungry, and others are not. I guess it's the option or lack of options for support. She started working at 19. At the contact centre, they have a Canteen. She informed me that she was ready for a change. She said she had been in the Call Centre long enough, seemed bored, and now wants something different. Her mother supports taking care of her baby by fetching the child from the creche. She has a supportive home environment. She is sure of what she wants and doesn't want. She is very ambitious and wishes that other young people would also be ambitious and not settle for Call Centre work.



Title: Youth Participant 4

Youth 4 is 26 and is studying Psychology through UNISA. She was well-presented, well-spoken, level-headed, and responsible. She is a single mother who supports a 1-year-old daughter. She informed me that her daughter was in Newcastle with her Mom. She was very grateful to have her mother support her with childcare. She goes home to see her child twice a month and sends her mother finances regularly for the care of her child. This type of support from extended family is common among young employees and in the African culture. This was her 3rd job. She worked for an insurance company and then at two call centres in the past 18 months. She found life before being a mother easier as she had no responsibilities. She did not like her insurance job and had to move provinces from Newcastle to Mpumalanga for the job. She found moving back home after being employed very difficult. She found accessing a call centre job easy. She informed me that the process was quite straightforward. She spoke about not having formal clothes, which a lot of young people have to do. She described having to adapt to the managers, wearing professional clothes, and behaving professionally. She mentioned that making friends in a call centre was easy as there were people you had a lot in common with. She was very much of the opinion that the workplaces are supportive, and that young people have all the support they need. She would not change anything about the environment.

Title: Youth Participant 5

Youth participant 5 is a young mother who fell pregnant shortly after matriculating. She is a strong young lady who didn't let her difficult circumstances hold her back from recreating her life. She pursued whatever opportunities she could find to care for her young son. She described the father of her child as unsupportive, which meant she had no options but to provide

for her child. She lived with her mother, who was supportive and ensured the family had food each evening. She received stipend support from two government initiatives she had signed up for; this was support from leadership and work readiness programmes—these stipends assisted her in arranging transport to her first job. Youth 5 is a good example of a young person with no options regarding family support, tertiary studies, etc. and simply had to plan to get her first job irrespective of the difficulties. It begs the question. Does a challenging personal set of circumstances better prepare one for a complex and challenging work environment? Could this be why many Call centre agents in underdeveloped countries succeed? Could they have built the resiliency muscle to deal with challenges? Do individuals with a 'privileged and relatively easy life' approach work differently from those with 'challenging life circumstances'?

Title: Youth Participant 6

Participant 6 was a bright and articulate young woman. She mentioned coming from a large family. While all family members supported each other, her father, a teacher, supported her financially during Covid. Her sister supported her during her beginning phase of work with transport money. She presented as a determined young lady. Despite having studied Public management, she decided to pursue alternate career options when she could not find a job in her field of study. She said her family assisted her with interview preparation and mock interviews. She had to travel long distances to work, and her family had to make financial sacrifices for her to get to work each day. She pays this back by assisting her sister with transport, and she also sees that working to support her family is what she wants to do. She didn't find the work transition easy but showed how her positive attitude and determination to succeed led to success. She continued job hunting during COVID-19 and began work during this challenging period.

She is a good example of a resilient and strong young woman. She is ambitious and sees a career path in the Call Centre, wanting to pursue a role in Quality Assurance. This is a candidate who could benefit from career progression in the contact centre.

#### Title: Youth Participant 7

Youth participant 7 (known as T) is a great example of someone who came from difficult circumstances but, with the right attitude and network, was able to fulfil her potential. She mentioned coming from a rural school without access to computers or technology. She was determined to work hard and develop herself. She moved from the rural areas to the Durban city centre to take up the opportunity to participate in a work readiness programme. She did not expect to get a job as she had no prior work experience and was informed that others were more experienced than she was. She spoke a lot about her. Why? Her reason for wanting employment was important. She explained that she worked hard in a work readiness programme to develop her why or internal locus of control. The personal mastery and strong sense of self that she exuded were evident in her language. She also mentioned how applying the tools she learned at the work readiness programme catapulted her to 'star' status in the Call Centre—allowing her to reach her targets and receive extra commission. This hard work and achievement had a double-edged sword for T. Her work colleagues ostracised her, called her names, and bullied her.

Though the bullying affected her, she decided to stick it out, as she says she had no other options. She needed the money and knew she was at work for herself and not others. It was humbling to see the maturity that this 29-year-old exhibited. She seemed to be emotionally mature, almost beyond her years. She shared her experiences from the heart and knows much

about what it takes to succeed in a Call Centre. She shared unique insights about the power of peers, the gap between team leads and peers, the use of drugs/cigarettes to cope, the attitudes young people need to succeed, and how she thinks training and induction can be improved. T is someone I would like to chat with in a year from now and get more insights.

#### Title: Youth Participant: 8

Youth participant 8 is the first male I interviewed. He did not have as much grasp on the English language as other youths I had interviewed. He did, however, have a deep hunger for learning. He enjoyed being coached and asked for help from peers or supervisors whenever he was uncertain about completing a task. He described having a positive experience with his trainer, who came from a similar background and had been through a similar work readiness programme. What I found to be strange was that Youth 8 began his role, signed his contract, and only once in the organisation found out about the role. He mentioned that he thought he would be working in a finance role. He didn't seem to understand his role when he signed his contract. Being independent and relying on family was a big driver for Youth 8.

He had a positive relationship with his peers and managers. He mentioned being stressed but not enough to use the EAP services. There seems to be a disconnect between the EAP services and the use of the EAP for challenges that youth are facing. Youth 8 seemed to highlight the need for social activities such as games and fun activities in the organisation. The gamification of dealing with stress or challenges outside of the traditional 1:1 method may be an area worth exploring. Contributing to the home was a huge stressor for P:8 he mentioned that “Even when you are not working, you are expected to contribute at home.” and also “I was stressed out that I'm not working. I have a qualification, but I'm not contributing at home.”

### Title: Youth Participant 9

Youth participant 9 is a 22-year-old young man. This was his first job. He explained that after completing matric, he looked for employment but remained unemployed for two years. He was in his new role for one month during the interview. Youth 9 did not receive much support from his family. His brother was very disparaging and told him that he would not get the job, so he did not want to borrow him money for the interview. He had to seek alternate ways to find money to transport. He came across as determined and proud and wanted to prove his brother wrong. He was hungry to succeed. He was proud to have gotten the role and prove his brother wrong. It seemed the work gave him confidence and contributed to his self-esteem. He was still in the training bay during the interview, where agents reduced targets and increased support from team leads. The training bay was a partial training and partial practice space. Youth 9 describes his current work environment as ideal. He enjoys support from his managers and trainers. He mentioned that at first, he did not think he could work in a call centre, but after the first few weeks and encouragement from trainers and managers know he had what it takes. After a few weeks of working in the call centre, he has expressed a renewed belief in his ability to work there and mentioned that he sees himself staying there for many years. The call centre provided Youth 9 with transport assistance and a meal voucher during the first month of training, which greatly assisted him. The tangible care demonstrated by the Call Centre showed that their youth was valued and supported. Youth 9 mentioned that in addition to this, he felt his manager cared, and he was very impressed that Managers would call to check in on agents if they did not arrive at work. He said they called to see if everything was okay, showing they were genuinely concerned about him. Youth 9 comes across as someone who needs and values encouragement and positive

affirmation. His self-belief was built up by being around a supportive and encouraging management team. He did not receive this from his home environment.

#### Title: Youth Participant 10

Youth participant 10 is 27 years old. She is well-spoken. She has a 5-year-old son. She says it's hard to work in a contact centre. She mentioned that she comes from a poor background. She found the interview relatively straightforward. She had no formal experience before this but had informal jobs working in tuckshops and as a domestic worker. She was in Transition Bay at the time of the interview. The transition bay enables a softer landing for her to learn and get used to the world of work. She was very grateful for the opportunity to take care of herself and her son, pay her son's school fees, buy clothes, etc. Working has given her a sense of purpose, and she said she is happy to be able to contribute to the household. She gets on well with her peers and is easy to talk to. She presented as a friendly person. She says the common goal of succeeding at the role makes the environment good and causes her to connect with her peers. She says making sales and determining to succeed are driving factors. Those without experience go through a 3-day work readiness programme at the workplace. She initially received financial support from her boyfriend to get to and from work. The support from the workplace with transport and lunch during the first month made attending work easier. She says she has had a positive experience at work in her first two months. She presented as ambitious and determined to help her family and her son. She says working gives her a sense of relief. She also enjoys taking care of her appearance now that she is employed. Looking good and dressing well or appropriately gives her a sense of confidence. She had a great experience at training.

#### Title: Youth Participant 11

Youth participant 11 is a 30-year-old male. As I reflected on Youth 11's age, the length of time he had been NEET was long. I was curious as to what the NEET factors for men and women were. He took a long time to establish himself. Youth 11 worked as a labourer and what he described as a 'bush mechanic'. He said he did this just to survive. He was a well-spoken, capable young man and it saddened me to think that lack of opportunity had given him a late start in life. He came from a rural part of KZN. He lived in Johannesburg for years (4-5 years) to complete his Diploma in Operations management. Youth 11 was not afraid of hard work and had worked as a labourer to make a living. He said he did whatever work he could get - just to survive. He received an NSFAS grant that enabled him to study in JHB, but he supplemented his income by working part-time. He found the recruitment process at the call centre reasonably easy. He was very excited by the opportunity to work and found the process exciting. He found meeting targets to be difficult. He found his team leaders to be very supportive. He mentioned that counselling was for 'elite or rich' people and was not part of his culture. He mentioned that counselling and sharing your feelings as a Zulu man was not something he would do or was done in his culture. So, the EAP would be more for other staff members than for him. He said that even though he had a job and was grateful but shared that the pay was low, and he wished that it could earn higher. He said there were expectations from his family that he should provide financial support. They saw him as now having a professional job and that he should now be able to provide for all. However, the low salary made it difficult to support extended families. He said the expectations to contribute at home was high, putting pressure on him.

Title: Youth Participant 12

Youth Participant 12 was a shy, timid young lady. She matriculated a year ago at the time of the interview. She had a 2-year-old son from a family where she was the breadwinner. She mentioned that she had an ill grandmother and that her mother had to stay home to care for the grandmother and could not work. She said she didn't enjoy the pressure at the call centre and found the call centre as 'stressful work'. She mentioned that the monotony of the job was tough and something that she did not like.

Furthermore, she mentioned that the Contact centre was crowded and that she was shocked to be treated badly by customers and to be sworn at. She found the call centre extremely stressful; she mentioned several times how stressful it was. She stated that a friend of hers left due to stress that she had experienced. She received emotional support from her mother as well as from her team leaders, trainers, and colleagues are supportive. She said she had told her friends about the call centre and encouraged them to apply. Though she found the work stressful and experienced emotional abuse, she stated that she had to endure it as she had to support her son and family.

Title: Youth Participant 13

Youth participant 13 is young, just 20 years old. She comes from a very sheltered and protected family. Her parents did not want her to work during Covid for fear she may contract the Corona virus, so she stayed at home for a year during Covid. She began work at the beginning of 2022, when the workplace re-opened. One of her friends shared the job opportunity with her - again pointing out the importance of networks. She says having had no previous work experience she found getting used to the role challenging, but she said she had adapted over time.



She says she was grateful for the support from friends and managers. She was determined to be independent and aspired to own her car and house. She finds that the motivational videos from her managers assist her in keeping her dreams alive. She also described her Mom as being very supportive.

#### Title: Youth Participant 14

Youth participant 14 was only 19 years old and was one of the youngest participants. She received the job through her network. Her father knew the trainer and told her about the role. She described the hiring process as rigorous and 'difficult to get into' - she said this makes this Call Centre a great opportunity. She said school and work are two completely different things. She said knowing how to 'act and behave' at work was the most challenging aspect of work. She was referring to the professional behaviour that first-time work seekers need to display. She said that the number of people on the call centre floor was quite a lot for her to take in. The number of people in one space was very overwhelming, and she found it hard to adjust to. Initially, she was put on performance management for not making sales. She took the performance management positively, and instead of seeing it as a warning, she viewed it as an opportunity to improve and keep track of her sales. She found the environment very supportive. She mentioned witnessing dismissals in the call centre was very 'scary'. She says you never know exactly what happened, leaving her afraid. The dismissals created a lot of uncertainty and increased the sense of the space being psychologically unsafe. She says she values independence and learned this from her grandfather. She wants to get her car and home and live independently. Her mother passed away when she was very young. She says she lives with her grandmother, who has no context for the

call centre work she does and doesn't understand that she doesn't feel like talking when she comes home.

Title: Youth Participant 15

This was a short interview. Youth participant 15 was not open to talking and kept her answers short. This was her first job, and she said she had no idea what a call centre was about and whether or not she would cope. She hoped the training would assist and found that it did. She informed me that she met friendly reception staff during the hiring process, who made her feel comfortable and relaxed. She discovered her team leaders and managers were helpful. She appeared self-motivated and goal-orientated. She wanted to succeed in the Call Centre environment. She spoke of climbing the corporate ladder and being a manager. Young people such as Youth 15 who are interested in the Call Centre environment must be groomed as Managers. There are some agents I've interviewed who state clearly that this is not something they want. She was grateful for the income and the ability to help and contribute to the family. She thinks that agents give up too quickly and that managers must give agents more time. She would have liked to receive more motivation from her managers. Peers at work were a big part of her experience and success; she said they pushed her and helped her deal with complicated work challenges. The call centre as a community is a place of belonging and connection that is vitally important.

Title: Youth participant 16

Youth participant 16 had a deep voice and a few years of work experience. He mentioned that he didn't get a chance to study and seemed disappointed. He has been with his current

employer for two years, a relatively long time for a Call Centre. It was important for him to be independent and not have to ask for assistance from family for his daily needs; he was grateful for the job. He lived out of town and shared how the employment cost was high. He had to travel very far (about 2 hours to the City) to seek employment. A friend let him know about the job opportunity. Adapting to a new environment was tough because he had no previous work experience. He received support from a friend for transport money. The friend also worked in the Call centre but lent him money for transport, enabling him to pursue the opportunity. It demonstrates that if one is hungry, one makes a plan and finds a way to seek employment. The creativity and ability to problem solve is a huge asset that unemployed youth bring to the workplace. Also, the generosity of friends who want to see their friends succeed is evident. He said most agents' success depends on their relationship with team leaders. An interesting comment from Youth 16 is that one is 'forced' to adopt - he calls the transition point a case of 'Just do it'. One wonders if this 'just do it' attitude causes marginalised youth to assume roles that perhaps more privileged kids could not. Does it beg the question, are marginalised youth more resilient?

Title: Youth Participant 17

She is a pleasant young woman, personable, and easy to talk to. She chatted about the hardship of dropping out of University as she found having a baby and studying challenging. A friend/neighbour told her about the job. She shared how she worked long hours and evening shifts, which exposed her to danger and resulted in her being robbed. Many young people have no option but to walk in dangerous places for transport. I sadly attended the funeral of a young agent who was stabbed to death for his cell phone. I know of many other young people who have

been robbed as a result of walking in dark places early in the morning or late at night. She found training easy as she said she was still fresh from school, so she found learning easier. She enjoyed the working environment at first - at least the training part. She shared how she experienced threats from managers, the long work hours, and that she felt drained in her first job. She mentions that call centres are the only place that hires young people without experience. She noted that the big difference between her first work environment and the second was that she felt valued and was given support and understanding in her second role. It motivated her to push through and to make money. She described work and her life as being very nice.

Title: Youth Participant 18

Youth participant 18 was employed in Call centres for three years. She presents as a strong, feisty young woman. She is sure of what she wants in life and is presented as self-motivated and hungry for success. She enjoys the fruit of her labour by going on holiday with friends, going out to lunch and buying herself clothes and other essentials. She mentioned that her mother let her know that she did not have expectations of her contributing to the family. She would prefer that her daughters enjoy their money. Youth 18 had considered returning to school but did not want to compromise her current income, so she felt trapped in her job. But she also spoke of this being a stepping stone. You could see how one could stagnate in a call centre because options for earning and employment were few. Youth 18 was a great motivational speaker with many years of experience; she would do well to be a part of a Manager training programme.

Title: Youth Participant 19

Youth participant 19 was a well-spoken, spoken young lady. She spoke frankly about how being unemployed made her feel excluded and 'not a part of society'. She described this as lonely and difficult. She repeated her matric as she had failed a subject or wanted to improve her results. Improving matric results is a popular option for many young South Africans. More schools have developed in SA called 'Post Matric Schools'. Youth 19 had been in her present role for 18 months. She was in her second role and had been promoted to head office. Her work experiences at the beginning of her career and current role were vastly different. She was initially afraid, cautious and inexperienced; now, she was excited about her future, proud of her job, and felt included. She said she had learnt a lot more about herself and owes this to her great work environment and culture, as well as her understanding Manager and supportive peers.

Title: Youth Participant 20

Youth 20 was a fascinating young man. I have known him for almost seven years. He attended a work readiness accelerator programme when I was his bridging manager seven years ago. At the time, he was only 19 years old. He had started his studies in education and dropped out after one year as he couldn't complete his practicals. He had been with his current organisation for seven years. He had experienced promotion opportunities and salary increases, which he was very proud of. He is hard-working, resilient, open to feedback and willing to go the extra mile. He is a friendly, gregarious person and the ideal call centre agent. He works in the financial services sector, and unlike other call centres, there were many growth opportunities. The employee tenure at this call centre was longer and had a low churn. It is a very supportive culture, and it was delightful to see this young man's growth.

## Appendix N: Excerpts of the steps taken in Youth Phenomenological Analysis

Step 1: Reading and deleting irrelevant information.

In this step I read the script as a whole to understand the participant's full story. I then deleted filler words and information that did not pertain to core story.

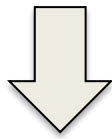
For example,

Original Transcript

"Youth should be um hungry. You know don't expect it to land at your door. It doesn't work like that. So when you um um um have the opportunity take full advantage of it. I think South Africa is eh eh is a country where it's not new if you have a sad story. Instead, get above the sad story you know and make it better for yourself and for your family. That should be motivating enough.

Revised transcript

"Youth should be hungry and should not expect opportunity to land at their door. Opportunity doesn't work like that; you should take full advantage of opportunity when you have it. I think in South Africa sad stories are not new. Instead, get above the sad story and make it better for yourself and for your family. That should be motivation enough."



Step 2: Preliminary meaning units which is defined as “the allocation piece of data that reveals a feature or trait of the phenomenon being investigated (Peoples, 2020, p. 42). Initial journalling took place after the reading of the individual story.

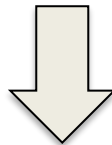
For example,

Meaning units or individual story 1) A sense of drive and determination from youth are need especially when it comes to opportunity 2) A deep sense of hopefulness and future oriented ownership to deal with difficult circumstances.

Journal Excerpt:

**Title: Youth Participant 19**

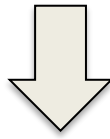
Youth participant 19 was a well-spoken, spoken young lady. She spoke frankly about how being unemployed made her feel excluded and 'not a part of society. She described this as lonely and difficult. She repeated her matric as she had failed a subject or wanted to improve her results. Improving matric results is a popular option for many young South Africans. More schools have developed in SA called 'Post Matric Schools'. Youth 19 had been in her present role for 18 months. She was in her second role and had been promoted to head office. Her work experiences at the beginning of her career and her current role were vastly different. She was initially afraid, cautious and inexperienced; now, she was excited about her future, proud of her job, and felt included. She said she had learnt a lot more about herself and owes this to her great work environment and culture, as well as her understanding Manager and supportive peers.



Step 3: Final meaning units (whole themes) based off combined meaning units of all participants.

For example,

Hunger for opportunity 2) Hope in the face of difficulty.



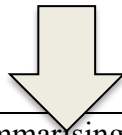
Step 4: Situated narratives according to Peoples (2020) is where participants stories are grouped using direct quotes. For this step Dedoose computer analysis was utilised.

For example,

The screenshot shows the Dedoose interface with five text excerpts. Each excerpt is preceded by a document icon and a title. The excerpts are as follows:

- 20: Ndumiso.txt** (Added 01/05/2023): learning from your mistakes and ensure that the next time you improve and do better.
- 20: Ndumiso.txt** (Added 01/05/2023): been getting any warnings or anything because I maintain my punctuality and being very consistent in what is the requirements from the company so that I can ensure that I'm in good book
- Indiwe Part 2.txt** (Added 01/04/2023): South Africa at this point, you all know each other's story you know? I think this is a country where its not new if you have a sad story. Instead get above the sad story and make it better for yourself and for you should be motivating enough.
- Indiwe Part 2.txt** (Added 01/04/2023): They should be hungry.
- Indiwe Part 2.txt** (Added 01/03/2023): I think it's also understanding that it does get better. And that it is ok you can make a few mistakes. The world will not crumble and stuff.

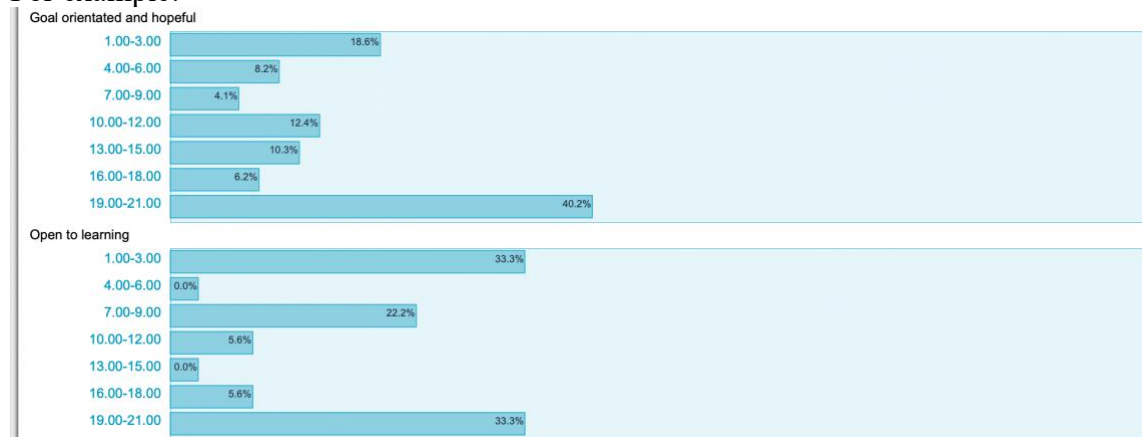
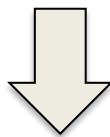
At the bottom, there are buttons for "View Text Excerpts Full", "Export Excerpts", "Make Active Set", "Add To Active Set", and "Remove".



Step 5: General narratives by summarising the individual stories of participants. This helped to organise the data and highlight the shared meanings of their experiences (Peoples, 2020).

Dedoose computer analysis was used to derive general narratives from the individual stories.

For example:





Step 6: The final step of the analysis was to create a general description focusing on key themes that emerged from participants' experiences. The word “Some” was occasionally used for topics with varying responses. The aim was to combine the main themes into a clear overall summary (Peoples, 2020). The final step resulted in the findings section and description of phenomenon that emerged from the data.

For example from Chapter Six Youth Findings:

Sub-theme: Goal-orientated and hopeful

Seventeen of the 20 participants (85%) had a positive, goal-oriented and hopeful outlook of their work life. Despite the problematic socio-economic circumstances, participants expressed a strong intention and goal-directedness.

“It doesn't matter where you come from if you know why you are here and why you want the things that you want.” (P:7)

“It’s not where I want to be, but I am hoping that eventually, I will get there.” (P:1)

“One day, eventually, I will have my own car and house.” (P:14)

The above quote powerfully illustrates Heidegger's concept of Dasein as being-towards-possibilities. Participants show an understanding of a future vision from where they are to a future-oriented hopeful disposition about owning their own car and house

*Note:* The figure above shows a step-by-step example of the phenomenological data analysis utilised for the youth data. Adapted from Peoples, K. (2020). How to write a phenomenological dissertation: A step-by-step guide (Qualitative Research Methods 56). SAGE Publications. [Kindle Edition].

### Appendix O: List of audit trail content

| Classification                                                  | File Types                                                                                                                                                                       | Evidence                                                                                                            |
|-----------------------------------------------------------------|----------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------|---------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------|
| Research purpose, aim & objectives<br>Intention and Disposition | Research Proposal                                                                                                                                                                | Written concept note<br>Written proposal<br>Progress reports<br>Feedback from reviewers<br>Final Proposal           |
| Research Tool                                                   | Interview<br>Schedules for each population group                                                                                                                                 | Results from pre-test<br>Final interview schedule                                                                   |
| Raw data                                                        | Audio recordings<br>Transcriptions<br>Summarised/highlighted excerpts                                                                                                            | 20 youth/employee interview<br>12 employer interviews                                                               |
| Data Analysis                                                   | Coded transcripts<br>Final code books<br>Dedoose Version 9.2.22<br>Individual youth journal entries<br>Personal reflexive journal<br>Mind Maps<br>Observation in contact centres | Word documents Excel files<br>Dedoose code trees and summaries<br>Miro Board mind maps<br>Reflexive journal entries |
| Process Notes                                                   | Ongoing analysis<br>log notes<br>Reflexive journal                                                                                                                               | Recorded research activities<br>Reflexive journal entries                                                           |

|                                               |                                                             |                                                                 |
|-----------------------------------------------|-------------------------------------------------------------|-----------------------------------------------------------------|
|                                               | Reading and note<br>taking of transcripts                   |                                                                 |
| Data Synthesis                                | Notes on emerging<br>patterns<br>Findings and<br>conclusion | Arrangement of findings                                         |
| Occupational Social<br>Work Model development | Notes and<br>synthesis of findings                          | Roles and functions of<br>occupational social work<br>developed |

## Appendix P: Ethics Approval Letter



Research Office

**HUMAN RESEARCH ETHICS COMMITTEE (NON-MEDICAL)**  
R14/49 Dorkin

**CLEARANCE CERTIFICATE**

**PROTOCOL NUMBER: H21/07/11**

**PROJECT TITLE**

A multi-modal study of youth transition to employment:  
Exploring the South African youth-organisation interface

**INVESTIGATOR(S)**

Mrs M Dorkin

**SCHOOL/DEPARTMENT**

Human and Community Development/

**DATE CONSIDERED**

23 July 2021

**DECISION OF THE COMMITTEE**

Conditionally Approved  
Permission letters required from Talksure and Daily credit corporation  
before data collection can commence  
Risk Level: Minimal

**EXPIRY DATE**

09 September 2024

**DATE**

10 September 2021

**CHAIRPERSON**

(Professor J Knight)

cc: Supervisor : Dr F Masson

**DECLARATION OF INVESTIGATOR(S)**

To be completed in duplicate and **ONE COPY** returned to the Secretary at Room 10004, 10th Floor, Senate House, University. Unreported changes to the application may invalidate the clearance given by the HREC (Non-Medical)

I/We fully understand the conditions under which I am/we are authorized to carry out the abovementioned research and I/we guarantee to ensure compliance with these conditions. Should any departure to be contemplated from the research procedure as approved I/we undertake to submit an amendment of the protocol to the Committee. **I agree to completion of a regular progress report. For Minimal and Low studies, this is due annually on 31 December. For Medium and High Risk studies, this is due twice annually on 30 June and 31 December.**

24 / 07 / 21

PLEASE QUOTE THE PROTOCOL NUMBER ON ALL ENQUIRIES