

# THE FUTURE OF OUR HISTORIES: YOUNG RURAL VOICES FROM DULLSTROOM-EMNOTWENI

**Christina Landman**

University of South Africa

Landmc@unisa.ac.za

## ABSTRACT

This article reports on three sets of interviews conducted with children and young people living in Dullstroom-Emnotweni on the Mpumalanga Highveld in eastern South Africa. Firstly, 50 learners between the ages of 10 and 14 were interviewed on their dreams for the future. Later that year, in 2011, a total of 60 young people who were still unemployed ten or more years after having finished school were interviewed on what was left of their dreams. Five years later, in 2016, a third group of young people between the ages of 18 and 24 were interviewed in order to establish whether the situation of marginalised young people in rural South Africa had changed. The primary school learners expressed their career hopes in terms of the needs of their marginalised society, that is, to become nurses, teachers and social workers. The first group of young people interviewed in 2011 blamed their shattered dreams on the unavailability of tertiary education and the reality of HIV infection. The second group, interviewed in 2016, quite similarly, expressed their concerns as a lack of job and educational opportunities, a lack of agency and choice, a lack of respect from society and decision makers, and an inability to escape from drugs and unhealthy sex.

**Keywords:** Dullstroom-Emnotweni; rural youth; marginalisation; agency; shattered futures

## INTRODUCTION<sup>1</sup>

During 2011 interviews were conducted with 110 young people in Dullstroom-Emnotweni. The township in which these interviews were conducted has been known as Sakhelwe, a township that came into being after forced removals in 1980. The people of Sakhelwe do not want their suburb to be known by this name anymore, and therefore reference here will be made only to Dullstroom-Emnotweni.

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1 Part of this article has been published as Landman (2013).

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Dullstroom-Emnotweni is situated on the Highveld of Mpumalanga, South Africa's most eastern province. It is the highest town above sea level in South Africa; consequently it is cold and rainy. The almost 9 000 inhabitants of the township – the majority of which is under the age of 25 – live in small four-roomed houses often shared by three to four generations. Almost three-quarters of the people have never been married and the HIV rate is 47.2%. Unemployment is in excess of 70%. Moreover, 30% of children of school-going age are not attending school (see *Census 2011 Municipal Report*).

Of the interviewees, 50 were learners from Mphilonhle Primary School, the only primary school in the township. They were between 10 and 14 years of age, and in Grades 5 to 7. By means of a structured questionnaire they were invited to tell the stories of their future dreams in terms of career employment.

Later the same year, in 2011, another 60 young people were interviewed, most of whom had, since leaving secondary school, been unemployed. Again, by means of a structured questionnaire, the youngsters were interviewed on their histories of unemployment, and their expectations for the future.

This article will present the research findings of these interviews, and make a short comparison between the expectations of the primary school learners and those of young people who have been unemployed for a period of time after finishing their schooling. A further comparison will be made between the 2011 interviews of unemployed young people, and the interviews conducted five years later in 2016.

## THE CAREER DREAMS OF PRIMARY SCHOOL LEARNERS

Auger, Blackhurst and Wahl (2005) have found that elementary-aged children in their career expectations focus either on social prestige occupations with a high income (e.g. doctors) or on fantasy careers with a high visibility (e.g. actresses/actors or TV presenters), and that these choices are gender-specific. Is this applicable to learners in poor, rural communities?

The learners interviewed at Mphilonhle Primary School in Dullstroom-Emnotweni are underprivileged children living in conditions of poverty, with exposure to HIV infection, drugs and liquor. There are also almost no health or social services in the township. There is an absence of doctors, nurses and social workers, not to mention lawyers and other professional service providers.

Interestingly enough, the learners did not opt for fantasy careers as is to be expected from their age group, but for careers from which the community would benefit in terms of health and social services.

First the parameters and findings of the research will be presented.

Ten male and 40 female learners were interviewed. There was no deliberate choice in this regard, but more girls than boys responded to the invitation to participate in the

research. Half of the learners were from Grade 7, the majority of whom were 12 years old. There were also 13 and 14 year olds in Grade 7.

To determine the social context of the interviewees, they were asked about the jobs in which their mothers were employed. Of the 50 children, 24 (almost half; 48%) indicated that their mothers were working. From my knowledge of the township, I will infer that these mothers are not working, not because their husbands are supporting them, but because they can find no employment. I once asked one of the elders of the Uniting Reformed Church about the extent of unemployment in the township and he answered: "There is so little work, not even the women have work!"

The mothers of the learners, then, who have found employment, are mainly employed in low-paying jobs. They are domestic workers, cleaners, kitchen workers, shop assistants, or farm workers. Two of them are teachers; one a nurse, and two mothers work for the municipality.

Another question invited learners to talk about their fathers and the work they were doing. Only 16 of the 50 learners (a third; 32%) indicated that their fathers were employed, while half of the mothers were working. Ten learners told the interviewer that both their mother and father were unemployed.

The fathers were employed as builders, drivers, security guards, garden workers, farm workers, (street) cleaners and waiters. One was a policeman. In one case a learner said: "My father is educated."

All of the learners indicated that they belonged to a church, a majority (24) to the Zion Christian Church (ZCC), a large African Independent Church. Nine belonged to the Uniting Reformed Church in SA (previously known as the Dutch Reformed Church in Africa), three more to the Lutheran Church and another two to the "Alliance," i.e. the Presbyterian Church. The rest belonged to independent churches with interesting names, such as the Sunpower Church, the Elohim Bible Church, and Hallo Him Bible Church.

To explore the world in which the learners live, questions were asked about their activities before and after school, and what their favourite TV programmes were. It seems that most of them wash before they go to school, and after school they do homework and clean the house. There do not seem to be many sport and cultural activities in which to participate after school. Their favourite TV programmes are the children's programmes on SABC2, including *Thakalane Sesame* and a variety of cartoons, as well as the late afternoon "soaps," including *7de Laan*. About a quarter of the learners do not have a TV at home because they do not have access to electricity.

Although this does not paint a picture of children growing up in an intellectually stimulating environment, the majority of the learners interviewed indicated that maths and English were their favourite subjects at school.

Then came the questions about the future.

At first the children spoke about what they were going to do after matric. One needs to bear in mind that these children are between 10 and 14 years of age. Without being

prompted, a majority of the children (20; 40%) said that they wanted go to university after finishing school. Five more would go to college. One wanted to go to university to study to become an actress, which makes one wonder whether “university” is a reality for children who grow up without access to tertiary education, and even without the technology – such as computers – to lead them to these facilities. One other girl mentioned that she wanted to become a famous radio presenter. All the other children envisaged that they would study further.

“What, then, do you want to study? What do you want to become one day?” To these questions, as mentioned before, the children gave surprising answers. They did not choose the fantasy and high income jobs, as one would have expected at their age, except for a few exceptions. They chose contextual careers through which the community would be served. Some wanted to become police officers, to arrest those who steal and protect the people of the township against crime. Others wanted to become nurses or teachers, because they wanted the people of the township to cope, and to be educated. Quite a few aimed to become social workers, to help poor people and children who do not have parents. Ten of them, all girls, wanted to become doctors to help sick people, pregnant women, and those hurt in accidents. A boy and a girl wanted to become lawyers to help the community and their country. “I want to become a scientist and discover different types of chemicals,” one said. And another wanted to “study for engineer, then become a fitter and turner because it is a good job and not many people take that job.”

And, of course, there were the odd fantasy careers. “I want to become an actress, because I want to see myself on TV.” “I am going to study to be a police, and become a gospel artist because I want to be famous.” “I want to become a pilot because I want to fly with an aeroplane” (girl). “One day I want to be an archaeologist because I like to see the world and learn more.” “I will be a geologist and have a business of my own.” “I will be a famous radio presenter and it will be easy to communicate with other people and learn things from them.” “I am going to sing and become a doctor to help people who have HIV and AIDS.”

## THE CAREER EXPECTATIONS OF POST-SCHOOL YOUTH

Far removed from the dreams of the primary school learners, the underprivileged youngsters of Dullstroom-Emnotweni are living out the reality of being educated but unemployed. Sixty young people between the age of 15 and 35 were stopped in the street and invited to be interviewed on their expectations of the future. Of them, 17 (28%) were between the ages of 15 and 19, 20 (33%) between 20 and 25 years, 13 (22%) between 26 and 29 years, and 10 (17%) between 30 and 35 years of age.

There were 23 (38%) men and 37 (62%) women.

A slight majority of the interviewees – as said, chosen randomly – had finished matric (34; 57%). The rest (25; 43%) went to school at least up to Grade 10 but did

not finish Grade 12. All of them attended the only secondary school in the township, Siyifunile Secondary School.

Of the 60 interviewees, 50 were unemployed, and had been unemployed since leaving school, some already with 20 years of unemployment. None of them had a tertiary education.

The 10 that were working were employed in low-income jobs. One was a waitress (R900 per month); two were working for the Independent Electoral Commission (R1 500 per month); three were domestic workers (between R600 and R1 900 per month); one was a driver (R1 600 per month); the rest were in the spa enterprise, for which Dullstroom-Emnotweni is famous, earning between R900 and R3 000 per month. It seems, then, that the youth have not moved beyond the low-paid jobs of their parents.

The initial aim of the research was to determine the role of religion in providing for the needs and expectations of the youth in the township. The participants were therefore asked to prioritise their needs and expectations in terms of the tangible and intangible assets of religion. The reason why “religion” was singled out as a potential needs provider is the fact, as mentioned above, that churches are the only support structures in the township in the absence of health and social facilities.

The University of Cape Town, under the leadership of Professor Jim Cochrane, developed the African Religious Health Assets Programme (ARHAP)<sup>2</sup> that defines religious health assets (RHAs) as “locally embedded religious images, values, practices, people and organizations that might issue an action to heal ... through local and translocal agency” (ARHAP n.d.). As religion’s intangible assets, the questionnaire – following the definitions of the ARHAP – mentions resilience, health-seeking behaviour, motivation, responsibility, a sense of duty, care, resistance, boundaries (norms/morals), sense of meaning, belonging, energy, trust, hope, love and faith. There were positive body language reactions when motivation, care, belonging, hope, love and faith were mentioned as assets to which the youth might have access. They felt uncomfortable with assets such as responsibility, boundaries and duty, probably because they felt that religion placed too much emphasis on these. They were totally amazed that resistance and health-seeking behaviour were religion’s business at all. A concept such as resilience was unknown to them; neither did they associate it with the assets of a church.

All in all there were very few stories told about the interviewees’ experiences with religion’s intangible assets. They knew religion provided norms and morals, but apparently they have never turned to religion for motivation and resistance, or even for sense making, love and care. Some expressed their disappointment that religious institutions did not support them in the recent service delivery uprisings. Actually, the majority of the young interviewees were charmed by the idea that religion, resistance and politics might be related.

Christianity is the predominant religion in the township, and church buildings range from informal structures to fairly strong rectangular buildings. There are mission

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2 In 2012 ARHAP repositioned as IRHAP, the International Religious Health Assets Programme.

churches and independent churches. There is a mosque in the “white” town that is only visited by the four Indian families who have businesses in town. Therefore, when the questionnaire referred to the tangible assets of religion, it referred to “the church.”

The interviewees were asked to talk about their needs for the following (and their need for the church to assist them in these needs): trained paramedics, hospital, HIV counselling, home visitations, faith healing, traditional healing, care groups, youth and women’s fellowships, choir, education, sacraments, rituals, rites of passage, funerals, connections and leadership skills.<sup>3</sup>

The interviewees showed great enthusiasm towards all these tangible assets that the church theoretically should be able to provide. Incidentally, they showed resistance to traditional healing and claimed that they never visited a traditional healer (although other research which is still being planned may give a different picture). It is also suspected that, when “religion research” is being conducted, interviewees want to give the “right” answer and not an honest one.

Nevertheless, this part of the research elicited an array of stories. “I live in a four-roomed house with my girlfriend, my children, my brothers and sisters, my mother and my grandmother.” There are thus four generations in one house. “I live in a four-wall (RDP) house with no water or electricity.” “Please give me a job.” “There are no computers in the township, how can I enrol at Unisa?” “Where can I get money to study?”

Eventually, the 60 interviewees prioritised their needs. Firstly, they need job opportunities. Secondly, they need further education and skills training. Thirdly, they need HIV counselling and home visitations for those who are HIV affected. They also need a youth centre with a soccer field and a hospital, and they need leadership skills.

## IN COMPARISON

1. While the primary school learners were dreaming big to save the world, i.e. their world captured within the boundaries of a marginalised township, the young people who left school a decade ago without being able to find employment had to face new realities:
2. Job opportunities are fewer and of a lower substratum, as the situation was for their parents.
3. Service delivery and training opportunities have not improved in recent years.
4. More churches have established themselves in the township the past 10 years, but FBOs are unable to assist in the basic needs of the youth, which centre around HIV care and training opportunities. The FBOs offer spiritual care but have failed the

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3 In reality, of course, the churches cannot provide for these needs because it is as poor as the community in which it functions. However, this research has inspired and guided FBOs (Faith Based Organisations) to become involved in the township.

youth in co-creating a sustainable future. The FBOs offer moral guidance while loneliness, boredom and unemployment rob the youth of their freedom to make moral choices.

5. For learners leaving secondary school who have abandoned their career dreams, HIV infection has become a reality of enormous proportions.

The rural youth's context of unemployment, lack of housing, recreational and health facilities, and massive exposure to HIV infection is far removed from the dreams of the young learners of Mphilonhle Primary. While the young learners fantasise about becoming doctors and social workers, the youth find themselves unable to access tertiary education, and while remaining unemployed they are ultimately forgotten – and disrespected by society.

## THE VOICES OF MARGINALISED YOUNG PEOPLE FIVE YEARS LATER

During 2016 I engaged in 60 more interviews with young people between the ages of 18 and 25. They were from the Sakhelwe township in Dullstroom-Emnotweni and Emtongeni township in Machadodorp. These interviews were done with Dr Hannelie Yates from the North-West University (Potchefstroom Campus) as part of a YOMA project. YOMA is the acronym for “Youth on the Margins,” a research project run jointly with the Nordic universities of Uppsala and Helsinki. The results of this case study will be described in two articles, “Do the FBOs Know Where They Are Going? Listening to the Voices of Rural Youth in the eMakhazeni Local Municipality” and “Africanity and Research: A Case Study in Rural South Africa” (still to be submitted for publication). Here the youth's voices will be noted in an unmediated way, and only the youth from Dullstroom-Emnotweni (Sakhelwe) will be presented. Their voices are organised under four themes: a lack of job and training opportunities, a lack of agency and choice, a lack of respect from society and decision makers, and an inability to escape from drugs and unhealthy sex:

### A Lack of Opportunities

The youth expressed themselves as isolated and deprived of opportunities to such an extent that they have to protect themselves against hoping and having expectations. Their parents are poor and uncaring. There are no training facilities or opportunities. They do not even go to the only facility in the township, the Youth Centre, to use the few computers there because nobody, not even the schools, has taught them how to use computers; they furthermore have a lack of data, as does the Youth Centre itself: “It is difficult. You can finish high school here but for me to go to university ... not even the municipality is assisting us.” “Our government in this town doesn't care about us ... There are people who want to open our minds, but our government doesn't want that.”



One of the youths describes spending his days as follows: “Life is not good because many of us leave school and it is hard to get jobs and I am drinking and smoking ... I play soccer in my free time. If I don’t play soccer I play video games ... I watch television and hang out with my friends.” Another describes the daily life of the youth in Sakhelwe in general: “They are just walking around, smoking drugs, ja. Dealing with friends or sleeping with something that means nothing to them. Just they are dead ... waiting for the sunset.”

The youth is not innocent in this regard; they themselves admit it, since they “(t)hey just wait for something to come to them” and “(t)hey believe in making quick cash.”

## A Lack of Respect from Formal Institutions

Respect, or rather the lack of it, is a huge concern amongst the youth of Dullstroom-Emtonjeni. Their parents reject them; the teachers beat them; the school classes are overfull, with between 60 and 80 learners in one class.

“According to my opinion in church they teach you how to treat others with manners or with respect. You must have respect for others so that you can get the respect back.” (Focus Group 2, Sakhelwe)

“We are not used to voice our own opinions,” one of the youth said when they were asked why they were hesitant to participate in the interviews.

Incidentally, a majority of the interviewees saw the FBOs (the church) as the place where respect should be taught and people should be empowered to respect one another.

## No Escape from Drugs and Meaningless Sex

“Most of the youth are ignorant. They do not know what they want. They do not see the future. But if you can say there is a new shebeen, they will run and see!” One of the youth summarised the drinking problem in Dullstroom-Emnotweni thus.

Another young man, who used to live in Sakhelwe but is now from Groblersdal, views youthful behaviour in Dullstroom-Emnotweni as follows: “In Sakhelwe we found out that the young people like alcohol ... And the second thing is that they don’t like school ... and they do not greet the teachers in a good way ... there is no entertainment, no sports or recreation ... In Groblersdal we find that when we are going on holidays, they create jobs for the school learners until January ... cleaning the place, send them to garages to wash cars, those that are good in soccer teach the younger ones ... And in Groblersdal it is one man, one girlfriend.” And this is the view of an insider: “Even though you can come today, it’s Monday, just pass the tavern and you will see that they are all there” (Nene, Individual Interview 1). “The parents give them money to go and buy food while they work, then they take out marog (spinach) and go to the tavern.” And another: “Teenage pregnancy is like insurance instead of going to school ... as if having a baby will fix the problems they have ... You are having a baby, you are part of the social grant. Maybe they think that money will help in the house, but it is still wrong to



have a baby at a young age ... it is a wrong decision to make in life ... you are not able to feed the house and the baby with the grant money.” And yet another: “The girls in Dullstroom like money; they are in bad shape and they do not have a salary of their own. They depend on a man’s salary. That is why you get one man having four girlfriends ... And that is why HIV is so high ...”

## A Lack of Role Models

The young people of Dullstroom-Emnotweni finally identified a lack of role models as a factor leaving them hopeless and holding them captive in passivity. The lack of healthy role models include their parents: “It is not good to be a young person here, because as a teenager you follow your parents and what they do in Sakhelwe. So, if they go to the taverns, you will also go to the taverns.” This lack of role models is extended to the whole of the community: “There is no future because if you grow up seeing people going to the shebeens, you fall for it because you grow up by seeing things. You think that is how life is, going to the shebeen.”

Another interviewee told an alternative story: “I will not be in any tavern ... I will stay here in Dullstroom ... our problem is that we do not have people with skills in Dullstroom ... my dad never finished school, ... he says to us it does not matter where you live but how you live ... you must have big dreams, and you must know what you deposit on your mind today is what you will draw tomorrow ... The thing that is killing the future of Dullstroom is that our parents do not motivate their children ... My father was drinking hard, very hard before he got here in this church. But then the church changed his life completely because when we got in this church he stopped drinking, he stopped smoking. I remember at work he got some warnings with drinking, but after he came to this church his life started to change completely. At work he got promotion, he is now getting a nice salary ... all six children are at university now.”

## CONCLUSION

In this article three sets of data were presented on the way in which children and young people saw their future in Sakhelwe in rural Dullstroom-Emnotweni. Firstly, 60 interviews with primary school learners revealed that they were, in spite of dismal domestic circumstances, dreaming of a future of contributing to their community in secure jobs such as nursing and teaching. They were indeed dreaming of salaried jobs and not of entrepreneurship of which the income was not secure.

Secondly, another 60 interviews were conducted with young people who have left school ten or more years ago and were still unemployed. To a limited degree, they still dreamed about a future, provided that training skills and job opportunities were made available, although they were not sure where the latter should come from. They

also lacked recreational facilities and were concerned about their health and whether facilities to care for those infected by HIV and AIDS could be provided.

Finally, five years later, a number of young people, slightly younger – between the ages of 18 and 25 – were interviewed on their expectations of the future. They were all unemployed and had no opportunities of training and further education. They admitted that hopes for the future have been eradicated by a lack of opportunities, role models, and respect for them as human beings. This resulted in them living from day to day, using alcohol and drugs, while their only hope lay in making quick cash and having a large variety of sexual relationships.

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