

Language, Relationality, and Career Guidance: A Community-Engaged Psychology Perspective

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Abstract

The importance of career guidance in enabling learners to make informed decisions about their futures cannot be overemphasised. Learners in under-resourced schools often face limited opportunities for meaningful support, with English-only career guidance restricting comprehension and engagement. Guided by the Relational-Contextual Career Framework (RCCF), this study explores how language and relational dynamics shape career guidance within a community-engaged service-learning initiative involving Organisational Psychology honours students at Rhodes University. Learner focus groups were used to gather data from high school students, and reflections were used to gather data from career psychology honours students participating in a service learning programme. The results demonstrated that learner comprehension, confidence, and participation were significantly impacted by the use of language and relational strategies. Student reflections highlighted the importance of adapting theory to local contexts, integrating career construction and life-design principles, and navigating multilingual challenges. Students' professional adaptability, reflective practice and cultural responsiveness were further enhanced through service-learning experiences. Findings validate the RCCF as a useful framework for operationalising multilingual, relational, and Ubuntu-informed pedagogies, supporting equitable, socially responsible career guidance in under-resourced schools. Findings also suggest that the RCCF can inform institutional community engagement strategies, providing guidance for culturally responsive, relationally grounded, and ethically oriented service-learning programmes.

Keywords: *Career guidance, service-learning, multilingualism, relational-contextual framework, Ubuntu, community engagement*

Introduction

Background and Context

Career guidance plays an important role in helping young people think through their educational and work pathways. For learners in under-resourced communities, practical advice about careers can open up opportunities, influence social mobility, and contribute to their overall well-being (Conley, 2010). In South Africa, however, these services are usually offered in English, which creates particular difficulties for learners who speak other home languages. In multilingual areas such as Makhanda, and especially in schools with limited resources, many learners find it hard to engage fully with the information and processes presented in career sessions (Msimanga & Lelliott, 2014). At Rhodes University, this challenge is taken up in the Career Psychology Honours module, where service-learning placements require students to provide career guidance in local high schools as part of their community engagement training. This approach enables students to apply theoretical knowledge, reflect critically on their practice, and contribute meaningfully to the local community. Unlike traditional classroom methods prioritising theory and memorisation, service-learning fosters experiential learning, dialogue, and collaboration. Through this model, both students and learners are positioned as co-constructors of knowledge.

Problem Statement

While career guidance offers important opportunities for supporting young people, its value is often diminished by the dominance of English as the main language of delivery. For many learners in under-resourced schools, this creates barriers to understanding and reduces their ability to engage meaningfully with the process. Sessions conducted only in English can restrict learners' participation, limit reflection on possible career paths, and make it harder to build self-insight. At the same time, honours students facilitating these sessions are not always equipped to work confidently in multilingual settings, frequently relying on English in both preparation and presentation. This mismatch highlights persistent challenges around fairness, cultural relevance, and the responsibility of higher education to advance inclusive and socially just forms of community engagement.

Existing scholarship demonstrates that language plays a decisive role in shaping learners' access to, and engagement with, educational interventions. Research on translanguaging demonstrates that incorporating learners' home languages can build confidence, encourage active participation, and strengthen understanding (Mateus, 2014; Parra & Proctor, 2023). In parallel, career construction and life-design studies from the Global South show that these approaches can be adapted effectively in multilingual environments (Savickas et al., 2009). Within the field of service-learning, scholars also point out that engaging students in community-based work supports the growth of civic professionalism, intercultural awareness, and reflective habits (Mtawa & Nkhoma, 2020). At the same time, African-centred pedagogies, including Ubuntu, emphasise the ethical and relational responsibilities

of educators to foster inclusive, context-sensitive approaches (Kotze, 2025; Ngubane & Makua, 2021). Despite these insights, a gap remains in understanding how learners in disadvantaged, multilingual contexts experience career guidance interventions, and how student facilitators navigate linguistic and cultural challenges. This study responds to that gap by examining the role of language in career guidance, focusing on both high school learners' experiences and honours students' reflections in a service-learning context.

Research Objectives

The study aims to:

1. Explore how language influences learners' experiences of career guidance interventions in underprivileged high schools.
2. Investigate how service-learning can enhance psychology students' capacity to deliver contextually relevant and culturally responsive career guidance.
3. Examine the pedagogical benefits and challenges of integrating multilingual practices into service-learning.
4. Contribute to the scholarship of community engagement by proposing a relational-contextual framework for localising career theories in psychology education.

Research Questions

1. How do high school learners experience career guidance when it is delivered exclusively in English compared to when it includes isiXhosa?
2. In what ways does incorporating service-learning into the Career Psychology module prepare honours students to engage more effectively with multilingual and culturally diverse learners?
3. What challenges and opportunities arise in adapting career guidance to be more responsive to learners' linguistic and cultural contexts?
4. How can relational-contextual approaches (drawing on social constructionism, career construction, life design, and Ubuntu) inform the localisation of career guidance pedagogy in psychology?

By integrating relational, linguistic, and ethical dimensions, the study not only addresses learner-level outcomes but also offers insights for institutional community engagement frameworks, highlighting how universities can structure service-learning programmes that are inclusive, socially responsible, and culturally responsive

Literature Review

Theoretical Framework: The Relational-Contextual Career Framework (RCCF)

The study uses the Relational-Contextual Career Framework (RCCF) as its guiding framework. The RCCF is an integrative lens that combines relational social constructionism, career construction and life design, and Ubuntu-informed approaches. Through these collective perspectives, careers are positioned as relationally, contextually, and ethically shaped.

Relational social constructionism (Endres & Weibler, 2017; Gergen & Gergen, 2015) foregrounds how meaning, knowledge, and identity are co-constructed through language and interaction. The choice of which language the career service will be provided in plays a central role in how learners access knowledge and make sense of career possibilities. Career construction theory and the life design paradigm (Savickas, 2013) enables learners to navigate uncertainty and to flexibly author their own career stories by emphasising adaptability, agency, and narrative meaning-making. Within the RCCF, Ubuntu is presented as the guiding ethic. It highlights values of relational dignity, belonging, and shared agency, while recognising indigenous languages and cultural resources as strengths for career development rather than as barriers (Kotze, 2025; Ngubane & Makua, 2021). Taken together, these ideas position career guidance as a dialogical process that is shaped by culture and context. It therefore provides a coherent rationale for this study's focus on bridging language barriers, enhancing learners' experiences, and preparing honours students to engage responsively in multilingual, relational contexts.

Figure 1 presents the Relational-Contextual Career Framework (RCCF), the theoretical lens underpinning this study. By integrating relational social constructionism, career construction and life design, and Ubuntu-informed perspectives, the framework presents career guidance as a process that is grounded in relationships, context, and ethics. The concentric design of the figure illustrates how the framework moves from a core concern with relational, contextual and ethical practice through its foundational theories to applied dimensions such as multilingualism, service-learning, and localised life-design practices, culminating in the intended research outcomes. This visualisation is significant because it highlights the interconnectedness of language, pedagogy and cultural ethics in shaping learners' experiences of career guidance. It also demonstrates how RCCF provides a coherent rationale for addressing language barriers, advancing learner engagement, and preparing honours students for adaptive, culturally responsive and socially responsible practice in multilingual contexts.

Multilingualism, Translanguaging, and Learners' Experiences (Research Question 1 & Research Question 3)

According to Padayachee et al. (2018), in the post-apartheid era South African higher education has become increasingly multilingual, with institutional reforms and student movements pushing for curriculum transformation and decolonisation. To improve epistemological access, national policy like the Language Policy Framework for Public Higher Education Institutions (DHET, 2020) requires the intellectualisation of African languages (Siziba & Nhongo, 2024). Webb (2012) emphasises that lecturers and students enter higher education with diverse linguistic backgrounds and varying proficiencies, which complicates learning, teaching, and assessment. Therefore, pedagogical strategies accommodating multiple languages and proficiencies – including translanguaging that enables learners to utilise their full linguistic repertoire for comprehension, expression, and meaning-making – are necessitated by this diversity (Lasagabaster & Garcia, 2014).

Empirical evidence has shown that multilingual pedagogies – including translanguaging, code-switching, and utilisation of multilingual resources – boost student engagement, deepen conceptual understanding and foster a sense of belonging (Adams et al., 2024; Mawonga et al., 2024). Incorporating students' linguistic repertoires into instruction improves conceptual understanding, preserves dignity, and advances decolonial objectives (Mawonga et al., 2024). Translanguaging is an instructional method that fosters learners' identities, supports epistemological access and challenges monolingual ideologies that marginalise students with multiple identities (Cummins, 2021; Somlata, 2022). However, challenges like limited disciplinary registers in isiXhosa, underdeveloped assessment practices and resource constraints persist (Mawonga et al., 2024).

RQ1 and RQ3 are directly informed by this evidence. It appears that the levels of engagement of students who seem to struggle with instruction solely in English rise when isiXhosa is utilised (Adams et al., 2024; Mawonga et al., 2024). Similarly, Mawela (2024) shows that while parents and educators often prioritise English for mobility and global opportunities, learners value isiXhosa for expression, engagement, and belonging. Learners who draw on their full linguistic repertoire for improved comprehension and participation can make use of translanguaging practices including mixed-language discussions, home-language storytelling, and collaborative meaning-making.

From the RCCF perspective, these tensions highlight that language choices in career guidance are relational (shaped by family and institutional expectations), contextual (mediated by socio-economic and cultural positioning), and ethical (linked to Ubuntu values of dignity and justice).

Practical lessons from this body of work suggest that career guidance delivered in multilingual settings should:

- Enable learners to express ideas in their home language before co-translating into English or disciplinary language.

- Employ multimodal and multilingual resources (podcasts, glossaries, translated slides) to scaffold understanding.
- Train honours students to facilitate translanguaging and reflect on language-mediated relational dynamics (Mawonga et al., 2024; Steele et al., 2022).

Service-Learning and Professional Adaptability (Research Question 2)

According to Choi et al. (2023), service-learning is widely acknowledged as a pedagogy that promotes civic identity, reflective practice and professional adaptability. Through structured service-learning, combined with mentored reflection and ongoing community partnerships, academic theory is translated into employable skills like flexibility, self-directed learning, and civic professionalism (Lattanzi, 2025).

Within the RCCF, service-learning provides the relational and experiential mechanisms through which career construction and life-design goals, adaptability, narrative identity and agency, are enacted in practice. For honours students, supervised reflection, coaching on engaging multilingually, and ongoing feedback with community partners boost professional preparedness and grow their ability to engage ethically and responsively with learners from diverse backgrounds. Applied to RQ2, this literature suggests that integrating multilingual and relational strategies into service-learning prepares psychology students to become more flexible and culturally attuned practitioners, aligning their development with the RCCF's emphasis on contextual and relational career pedagogy.

Life Design and Career Construction in Multilingual/Global South Contexts (Research Question 3 & Research Question 4)

Life design theory (Savickas, 2013) emphasises adaptability and narrative meaning-making in career development. Empirical studies show that these approaches can be adapted successfully in multilingual, resource-constrained contexts. Group-based life-design interventions in rural South Africa improve clarity, agency, and career decision-making by tailoring narrative exercises to local languages and cultural repertoires (Jude & Maree, 2024). This evidence aligns with RQ3 and RQ4. It demonstrates that career construction approaches are not fixed to Western, English-dominant contexts but can be localised through translanguaging, narrative prompts in isiXhosa, and group-based reflective tasks. The RCCF thus operationalises life-design methods in ways that are relationally grounded, contextually relevant, and ethically responsive to learners' linguistic and cultural identities.

Ubuntu and African Relational Pedagogies (Research Question 4)

Scholars drawing on Ubuntu, including the notion of ubuntu-gogy, remind us that education is not only about individual achievement but also about shared responsibility and solidarity. In classroom practice, these approaches have been shown to encourage a stronger sense of belonging, invite wider participation and support the growth of collaborative ways of learning and being together (Makalela, 2023). Importantly, translanguaging case studies

link Ubuntu principles to multilingual practice, showing how legitimising learners' home languages affirms dignity, belonging, and shared knowledge creation.

In the RCCF, Ubuntu provides the ethical anchor: career guidance practices such as code-switching, home-language storytelling, and community co-production of resources are framed as acts of respect and social repair. This directly informs RQ4 by demonstrating how relational-contextual approaches can guide the localisation of career guidance pedagogy in ways that are not only effective but also just and humanising.

Integration and Synthesis Across Strands

Integrating multilingual/translanguaging strategies with Ubuntu-informed relational pedagogy and life design practices can provide a relational-contextual pathway for more equitable career guidance. In a study on Ubuntu translanguaging, Sefotho (2022) shows that when schools adopt translanguaging as part of their pedagogical approach, learner participation and understanding improve significantly. Similarly, life design research in South Africa, such as Maree (2015), demonstrates that when learners are encouraged to narrate their careers, identify values, interests, and strengths in culturally negotiated ways, they experience greater agency and hope. Multilingualism, service-learning, life design and Ubuntu are all integrated into the RCCF, which offers a lens through which to view these components both independently and in combination. This directs relational, contextual and ethically based interventions.

Collectively, the literature demonstrates that service-learning fosters professional adaptability (RQ2), multilingual pedagogies improve epistemological access and belonging (RQ1), and career construction and life design approaches can be modified for multilingual Global South contexts (RQ3). Ubuntu provides the ethical grounding to integrate these strands into a cohesive, relationally anchored pedagogy (RQ4).

Yet, despite these advances, the literature remains fragmented: multilingualism, service-learning, life design, and Ubuntu have typically been explored in isolation rather than as interconnected dimensions of career guidance. This fragmentation obscures how relational contexts between learners, student facilitators and communities shape career guidance's process and outcomes. In particular, the intersection of language barriers, relational pedagogy and professional development in under-resourced South African schools has received little empirical attention. The RCCF thus stands on firm empirical ground as a framework for localising career guidance in psychology, bridging language barriers and preparing both learners and students for adaptive, relational and socially responsible career development. These theoretical threads and applied dimensions are presented in Figure 1, which uses a layered-circle model to illustrate the RCCF.

Relational-Contextual Career Framework

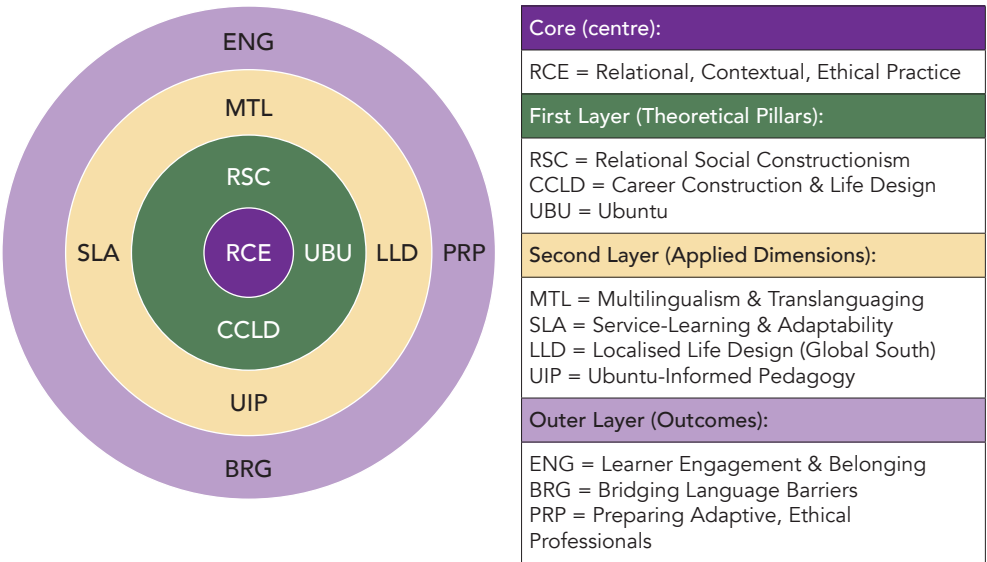


Figure 1: Relational-Contextual Career Framework (RCCF). RCE represents the core principle of career guidance as relational, contextual, and ethical practice. The theoretical pillars (RSC, CCLD, UBU) inform applied dimensions (MTL, SLA, LLD, UIP), which in turn connect to the intended research outcomes (ENG, BRG, PRP)

Figure 1 illustrates the guiding lens for this study, positioning career guidance as fundamentally relational, contextual and ethical. At its core, the framework emphasises relational, contextual and ethical practice, supported by three theoretical pillars: relational social constructionism, career construction and life design, and Ubuntu. These pillars inform applied dimensions, multilingualism and translanguaging, service-learning and professional adaptability, localised life design, and Ubuntu-informed pedagogy, which, in turn, shape the intended outcomes, bridging language barriers, fostering learner engagement and belonging, and preparing honours students as adaptive, ethical professionals. This layered-circle model visually captures how theory, practice, and outcomes converge, demonstrating the coherence and relevance of the framework for addressing language, contextual and ethical challenges in career guidance within the South African context. The RCCF extends beyond existing service-learning frameworks by integrating relational ethics, multilingual inclusivity, and Ubuntu-informed pedagogy as central design principles. This positions it as a novel, community-engaged psychology framework that situates language and relationality at the heart of ethical, decolonial career guidance practice.

Methodology

Research Design

This study adopted a qualitative research design, grounded in the principles of community-based participatory research (CBPR). CBPR provided the foundation for collaboratively engaging both the high school learners and the Rhodes University honours students as participants whose voices and perspectives were central to the research process. The study was grounded in CBPR principles in three ways:

1. **Participation:** Learners and honours students were positioned not merely as research subjects but as co-constructors of knowledge, contributing their lived experiences and reflections.
2. **Relational engagement:** The research built on an existing service-learning partnership between Rhodes University and Ntsika Senior Secondary School, thereby embedding the study within an ongoing reciprocal relationship.
3. **Contextual relevance:** By situating the inquiry in a previously disadvantaged schooling context in Makhanda, the study foregrounded the importance of local realities, language, and cultural practices in shaping the career guidance process.

This design was chosen to ensure that both groups, learners receiving career guidance and honours students providing the intervention, were represented in ways that captured the relational, contextual, and dialogical dimensions of the career guidance process.

Research Context and Positionality

This study was conducted through a partnership between Rhodes University and Ntsika Senior Secondary School, serving learners from previously disadvantaged backgrounds. The focus was on career guidance challenges, particularly language barriers, limited exposure to higher education, and relational factors affecting participation. As a researcher and course facilitator, I coordinated the service-learning programme, supported honours students, and conducted focus groups. My perspective, informed by relational social constructionism, emphasised valuing participants' voices, cultural and linguistic knowledge, and co-construction of meaning. This positioning ensured the study remained ethically grounded and contextually sensitive.

Participants and Context

The study was conducted in Makhanda, Eastern Cape, South Africa, at Ntsika Senior Secondary School, a school serving learners from previously disadvantaged backgrounds.

- **Learners:** A total of 75 learners participated in the study. These learners took part in 10 focus groups, with group sizes ranging from 7 to 8 learners each.

- Honours students: Thirteen honours students were enrolled in the Organisational Psychology service-learning course at Rhodes University. Of these, 8 students provided informed consent for their written reflections to be included in the study.

The service-learning project formed the practical context of the study. As part of their coursework, the honours students facilitated career guidance sessions with high school learners, after which they submitted reflective assignments. These reflections, together with learner focus group data, formed the dual sources of qualitative data.

Honours Students' Engagement and Reflection

Honours students enrolled in the Career Counselling service-learning course were responsible for delivering career guidance sessions to Grade 9 learners. Prior to the sessions, students engaged in structured preparation activities, which included familiarising themselves with the RCCF, researching the school's cultural and linguistic context, and collaboratively planning session activities. Students were organised into groups, ensuring that each included at least one isiXhosa-speaking member, facilitating translanguaging and culturally responsive engagement.

During the sessions, students implemented interactive exercises, icebreakers, and collaborative discussions to build rapport, establish trust, and encourage active learner participation. After each session, students completed reflective assignments documenting their experiences, challenges, and insights. Reflections captured observations on learner engagement, relational dynamics, language use, and the effectiveness of pedagogical adaptations. These reflections served both as research data and as a tool for professional development, fostering students' ethical practice, cultural sensitivity, and responsiveness to community needs.

Data Collection

Two forms of qualitative data were collected:

1. Focus Groups with Learners

- A total of 10 focus group sessions were conducted: 5 on 26 August 2025 and 5 on 28 August 2025.
- Each focus group included 7–8 learners, generating rich discussions about their experiences.
- Focus groups were facilitated in both English and isiXhosa, enabling learners to express themselves in their preferred language.
- Guiding questions explored learners' perceptions of the accessibility, engagement and relevance of the career guidance sessions, with particular emphasis on the role of language in shaping understanding.

2. Honours Students' Reflections

- Written reflections were drawn from assignments submitted by honours students as part of their service-learning course assessment on or before 23 May 2025.
- These reflections captured the students' perspectives on challenges and opportunities encountered in delivering career guidance, especially regarding navigating language barriers and building rapport with learners.

Community Engagement and Research Process

Participants were purposively selected through the existing Rhodes University-Ntsika partnership to align with the aims of the service-learning programme. Grade 9 learners were chosen for their career decision-making stage, and honours students participated as part of their accredited course. Engagement occurred in three stages – preparation, facilitation, and reflection – supported by semi-structured focus group guides and reflective assignments. Data were analysed thematically, guided by Braun and Clarke's (2006) approach and interpreted through the RCCF lens. Consistent with community-based participatory research (CBPR) principles, collaboration with school staff ensured alignment with community priorities, contextual relevance and shared interpretation of findings, reinforcing reciprocity, co-learning, and ethical integrity.

Data Analysis

Data, from both focus groups and written reflections, were analysed thematically, following Braun and Clarke's (2006) six-step approach:

1. Familiarisation with the data.
2. Generating initial codes.
3. Searching for themes.
4. Reviewing themes.
5. Defining and naming themes.
6. Producing the report.

Themes were generated inductively from the data but were also interpreted through the lens of the RCCF, which guided the study's analytic orientation. Data collection continued until data saturation was reached, that is, when no new themes or insights were emerging from the focus group discussions and the reflective writings. After the tenth focus group, recurrent ideas and patterns were consistently observed, signalling that thematic saturation had been achieved.

Triangulation was achieved through the integration of two complementary data sources: learners' focus group narratives and honours students' written reflections. Comparing these perspectives allowed for cross-validation of themes and strengthened the study's rigour by highlighting convergences and contrasts in how both groups experienced the relational and linguistic dimensions of the career guidance process.

Ethical Considerations

Ethical clearance for the study was obtained from Rhodes University on 30 May 2025 (Ethics Approval Number: 2025-8389-9753). A subsequent approval to include honours students' written reflections as a research data source (with informed consent) was granted on 11 August 2025.

All participants provided informed consent prior to participation. Grade 9 learners (ages 16-18) completed assent forms, and parental/guardian consent was obtained, in accordance with ethical guidelines for research involving minors. Honours students provided written informed consent for their reflective assignments to be included as research data. Confidentiality and anonymity were strictly maintained through the use of pseudonyms, and all data were securely stored and accessed only by the research team for research purposes.

Results

The focus group data revealed consistent themes around learners' experiences of language use, accessibility, and relational dynamics during career guidance sessions facilitated by Rhodes University honours students. The facilitators of the focus groups themselves came from diverse linguistic backgrounds; some were monolingual English speakers, while others were multilingual and encouraged learners to use isiXhosa or English. This diversity provided contrasting yet complementary insights into the ways language and facilitation shape learner engagement.

The reflections of honours students revealed consistent themes around their preparation, pedagogical adaptations, and management of language dynamics during career guidance sessions at underprivileged high schools. In their class preparation, all materials were initially developed in English, but students actively localised career theories to align with the learners' cultural, linguistic, and developmental contexts. To address potential language barriers, students were organised into four groups, each including at least one isiXhosa-speaking member whose mother tongue facilitated translanguaging during sessions. The groups also conducted research on the learners' school culture and community context, aiming to provide career guidance that was meaningful and relevant. Among the honours students were students who did not speak isiXhosa; they therefore learned basic isiXhosa phrases, such as greetings, to build rapport and accommodate learners' linguistic needs. During the sessions, introductions and explanations initially began in English, but

facilitators flexibly switched to isiXhosa as required, ensuring that learners could engage fully and comprehend the guidance provided.

Language and Accessibility (RQ1 & RQ3)

Focus Groups – Learners

Learners repeatedly emphasised that English-only facilitation limited their participation: learners hesitated, struggled to express themselves, or relied on peers for translation. For example, one learner said:

I wanted to say something, but I didn't know how to say it in English, so I stayed quiet.

Multilingual sessions created an environment that encouraged isiXhosa usage. Learners reported increased comprehension and confidence:

When we spoke in isiXhosa, it was easier to ask questions and understand what they were saying.

Reflections – Honours Students

Students recognised that language facilitated self-discovery and engagement:

When I met them at their level of understanding, I found that they were able to engage more even in their home language. The sessions became more than just giving them information and advice, but also sessions of self-discovery.

Translanguaging was a critical strategy, though initial nervousness emerged when using languages in which students were less fluent:

I was feeling nervous due to the language barrier. I am English and Setswana speaking, and not fluent with isiXhosa, which is the preferred language of communication among students at Ntsika.

These findings contribute to decolonisation discourse by demonstrating how multilingual facilitation and the inclusion of learners' cultural and linguistic knowledge challenge the dominance of English-only pedagogies, validating local languages and epistemologies in educational practice.

Relational Dynamics and Confidence (RQ3)

Focus Groups – Learners

Peer support and collective problem-solving enhanced confidence:

When my friends helped me explain what I wanted to say, I felt part of the group and not afraid to talk.

Reflections – Honours Students

Creating a warm, interactive environment facilitated learner engagement:

To ease the tension and create a warm atmosphere, we played a few ice breakers. These ice breakers allowed us to give them insight on what we were there to do, so that they could relax and engage freely.

Awareness of learners' backgrounds enabled tailored guidance:

The class was given an interactive exercise... This exercise taught me how to apply both traditional and modern career theories to create career interventions for the learner.

By foregrounding learners' cultural and linguistic contexts, and integrating Ubuntu-informed relational practices, this study highlights how career guidance can be decolonised through participatory, contextually grounded approaches that prioritise local knowledge and relational equity.

Service-Learning and Professional Adaptability (RQ2)

Reflections – Honours Students

Preparation and mentorship feedback strengthened professional skills:

The feedback we received from our mentors and lecturer during the preparation phase played an important role in us delivering excellent work... It also gave me insight on how to use my personality to my advantage – linking my social personality type and being able to gel well with the grade 9s and build a good rapport.

Service-learning helped translate theory into practice and build confidence:

Initially, the thought of going there for this career guidance experience made me nervous... The days leading up to meeting the grade 9s, the nervousness subsided a bit because of all the practice and communication within my group and with the rest of my class.

Career Construction, Life Design, and Practical Guidance (RQ3 & RQ4)

Reflections – Honours Students

Applied career theories enabled learners to connect their interests, strengths, and values to career options:

The self-exploration exercise using career theories, the role-playing career guidance scenario, and the creation of an interactive career guidance activity... taught me that career guidance is a collaborative process between the client and the counsellor.

Learners requested more practical examples beyond Rhodes University offerings:

I wanted to know about careers like medicine in other universities, not just Rhodes. We need to see all the options.

Challenges and Adaptive Strategies

Reflections – Honours Students

Time constraints, variability in learners' participation and language proficiency were challenges:

I feel as though if we had longer sessions with them, we would have been able to answer more questions and do more reflective exercises.

Adaptation strategies included session restructuring, peer mediation and translanguaging:

Even with these challenges, these activities clarified how theory can be used in practice. I now recognise this as a necessary skill for future client interactions.

Key Pedagogical Insights

Reflections – Honours Students

Career guidance as self-discovery:

Career guidance allowed the grade 9s to think beyond what their circumstances allow them, to understand that success is not a one-size-fits-all but rather subjective based on their self-concept.

Experiential preparation and integration of theory into practice:

The self-exploration exercise, the role-playing, and the creation of an interactive career guidance activity... taught me that career guidance is a collaborative process between the client and the counsellor.

Cultural and relational responsiveness:

Creating a safe environment in a career guidance experience is essential, as it gives the individual room to feel free exploring their self-concept without fear of judgement.

The findings of this study are summarised in Table 1, which aligns the results with the research questions and highlights key insights derived from both learner focus groups and honours students' reflections. The table presents a structured overview of how language dynamics, service-learning experiences, life design practices and Ubuntu-informed relational approaches shaped the inclusivity and effectiveness of career guidance interventions. For instance, learners noted that "when we could speak in isiXhosa, I felt confident to ask questions," while students reflected, "Translanguaging allowed me to meet the learners at their level of understanding." By organising the findings in relation to each research question, the table offers a concise lens through which the interplay between linguistic, cultural, and relational factors can be understood.

Table 1: Summary of Key findings

Research Question 1: How do language barriers shape learners' access to career guidance?	
Key Finding(s)	English-only facilitation created hesitation, silence, and disengagement; translanguaging increased comprehension and active participation.
Illustrative Evidence	Learners responded more confidently when explanations and questions were given in isiXhosa alongside English: <i>"I wanted to say something, but I didn't know how to say it in English, so I stayed quiet"</i> (Learner Focus Group 1, P1); <i>"When we spoke in isiXhosa, it was easier to ask questions and understand what they were saying"</i> (Learner Focus Group 3, P2)
Contribution/ Implication	Confirms that language is both a barrier and a resource. Supports calls for multilingual pedagogies in career guidance.
Research Question 2: How does service-learning shape students' professional adaptability?	
Key Finding(s)	Students developed flexibility, resilience, and cultural sensitivity in responding to linguistic and relational dynamics.
Illustrative Evidence	Students reported that navigating translation and relational complexities improved their facilitation skills: <i>"The feedback we received from our mentors and lecturer during the preparation phase played an important role in us delivering excellent work... It also gave me insight on how to use my personality to my advantage – linking my social personality type and being able to gel well with the grade 9s and build a good rapport"</i> (S5); <i>"Initially, the thought of going there for this career guidance experience made me nervous... The days leading up to meeting the grade 9s, the nervousness subsided a bit because of all the practice and communication within my group and with the rest of my class"</i> (S3)
Contribution/ Implication	Service-learning strengthens employability and professional adaptability in multicultural contexts.
Research Question 3: How can life design and career construction approaches be adapted to Global South, multilingual settings?	
Key Finding(s)	Learners engaged more meaningfully when narrating career stories in their own language and when cultural values were acknowledged.
Illustrative Evidence	<i>"The self-exploration exercise using career theories, the role-playing career guidance scenario, and the creation of an interactive career guidance activity... taught me that career guidance is a collaborative process between the client and the counsellor"</i> (S2); <i>"I wanted to know about careers like medicine in other universities, not just Rhodes. We need to see all the options"</i> (Learner Focus Group 4, P2)
Contribution/ Implication	Life design approaches must be adapted for collective, culturally grounded understandings of career in the Global South.

Research Question 4: What role does Ubuntu play in shaping relational and ethical dimensions of career guidance?	
Key Finding(s)	Ubuntu principles (respect, mutuality, care) were evident in learner–facilitator interactions and shaped trust-building.
Illustrative Evidence	Learners described feeling ‘seen’ and ‘valued’ when facilitators acknowledged their background and language: <i>“Creating a safe environment in a career guidance experience is essential, as it gives the individual room to feel free exploring their self-concept without fear of judgement”</i> (S6)
Contribution/ Implication	Ubuntu provides an ethical grounding that integrates language, life design, and service-learning into RCCF.

Broader Implications for Community Engagement Across Disciplines

Although this study was situated within Psychology, its findings hold wider relevance for community engagement (CE) practice across disciplines. The emphasis on language inclusion, relational responsiveness and contextual understanding provides transferable insights for disciplines such as Education, Health Sciences, Social Work, and Linguistics, where engagement often occurs across linguistic and cultural boundaries. The study demonstrates that multilingual, relationally grounded and participatory approaches enhance accessibility, trust, and mutual learning between universities and communities. By integrating principles of Ubuntu, co-learning, and contextual relevance, CE projects in other fields can similarly foster ethical, inclusive, and sustainable partnerships that recognise and value local knowledges.

Discussion

‘This study explored the experiences of honours students delivering career guidance to grade 9 learners in a local underprivileged high school, focusing on the role of language, service-learning, multilingual practices, and relational-contextual pedagogies. Using the RCCF as a guiding lens, the findings are interpreted in relation to each research objective.

Language as a Barrier and a Resource (RQ1 & RQ3)

It became evident that the language used in career guidance sessions strongly influenced how learners took part and made sense of the content. In sessions conducted only in English, some learners appeared hesitant, chose to remain silent, or relied on classmates’ assistance to understand the material. When facilitators included learners’ home languages, however, participation became more confident and discussions were livelier, with learners engaging more deeply with the ideas being explored. Learners’ quotes, such as “When we spoke in isiXhosa, it was easier to ask questions and understand what they were saying”, exemplify this relational and cognitive impact.

From the RCCF perspective, language is far from neutral. It acts as a relational and contextual tool that shapes access to knowledge, self-expression and social inclusion (Gergen & Gergen, 2015; Endres & Weibler, 2017). The results further align with research on translanguaging. Using learners' home languages in teaching seemed to make understanding easier, and gave learners a greater sense of dignity. It also helped them engage with new ideas more confidently (Mawonga et al., 2024; Adams et al., 2024). These findings point to the importance of including home languages in career guidance, not just for practical learning, but as a way to respect and affirm students' cultural identities.

Relational Dynamics and Learner Confidence (RQ3)

What emerged from the study was that learners' confidence and sense of agency were closely tied to the social context around them. In practice, when classmates helped one another, when translations were done together, and when facilitators fostered multilingual, supportive spaces, learners were more willing to speak up and explore ideas. These interactions allowed them to make sense of concepts collaboratively, rather than individually: *"When my friends helped me explain what I wanted to say, I felt part of the group and not afraid to talk."*

Similarly, honours students noted that establishing rapport and interactive engagement strategies, such as icebreakers, allowed learners to relax and engage fully. This relational responsiveness aligns with the RCCF's emphasis on the social construction of career knowledge, where meaning emerges through interaction, mutual recognition, and culturally attuned facilitation (Savickas, 2013; Jude & Maree, 2016). Silence in English-only sessions reflects the relationally constructed barriers that limit agency, whereas inclusion of home languages and peer support embodies Ubuntu-informed pedagogies by affirming dignity, belonging, and collective problem-solving (Makalela, 2016).

Service-Learning and Professional Adaptability (RQ2)

Engagement in service-learning enhanced honours students' professional adaptability, reflective practice and culturally responsive facilitation. Students' reflections highlight the role of preparation, mentorship and feedback in translating theoretical knowledge into contextually relevant guidance: *"The feedback we received from our mentors... gave me insight on how to use my personality to my advantage – linking my social personality type and being able to gel well with the grade 9s and build a good rapport."*

These findings confirm prior literature demonstrating that structured service-learning strengthens professional skills, civic professionalism and reflective capacities (Johnson et al., 2021). Within the RCCF, service-learning functions as the relational and experiential mechanism through which students enact career construction and life-design principles in real-world settings, integrating adaptability, narrative meaning-making, and ethical engagement.

Career Construction, Life Design, and Relational Context (RQ3 & RQ4)

Students' use of career theories to guide learners reflects the adaptability of life-design approaches in multilingual and resource-constrained contexts: *"The self-exploration exercise using career theories... taught me that career guidance is a collaborative process between the client and the counsellor."* Learners' requests for more practical examples illustrate the importance of contextualising guidance beyond institutional limitations.

This aligns with the RCCF, which situates career construction as relationally and contextually embedded. Meaningful engagement requires that career guidance be co-constructed with learners, acknowledging their linguistic, cultural, and socio-economic realities. Translanguaging, interactive exercises and narrative exploration operationalise life design principles ethically and relationally, allowing learners to author coherent career narratives while developing self-awareness and agency (Savickas, 2013).

Ubuntu and Ethical Relational Pedagogies (RQ4)

Ubuntu-informed principles were evident in learners' collective support, peer translation, and the inclusive classroom climate fostered by honours students: *"Creating a safe environment in a career guidance experience is essential, as it gives the individual room to feel free exploring their self-concept without fear of judgement."* These practices affirm communal identity, dignity, and relational equity, resonating with African pedagogical frameworks that emphasise ethical, socially responsible education (Makalela, 2023).

Within the RCCF, Ubuntu provides the ethical anchor for career guidance, highlighting that relational and multilingual strategies are not merely instrumental but central to fostering equity, confidence, and meaningful engagement.

Synthesis and Implications

Taken together, the findings demonstrate that:

1. **Language choice shapes comprehension and engagement** – translanguaging is critical in multilingual contexts.
2. **Service-learning strengthens professional skills and reflective practice** – enabling students to deliver contextually responsive guidance.
3. **Career construction and life-design approaches are adaptable** – relational and culturally grounded facilitation enhances learners' agency and self-understanding.
4. **Ubuntu-informed pedagogies provide an ethical framework** – promoting dignity, belonging, and collective meaning-making.

The study validates the RCCF as a coherent framework for operationalising relational, contextual, and ethical career guidance in under-resourced multilingual contexts. It extends the literature by demonstrating how translanguaging, relational facilitation, and ethical

considerations can be integrated into service-learning practices, supporting culturally responsive and humanising career guidance in Global South settings.

Table 1 illustrates that career guidance outcomes were strongly shaped by the linguistic and relational context of the sessions. Learners' engagement and comprehension improved markedly when translanguaging was incorporated, confirming the role of multilingual strategies in promoting epistemological access and belonging. Honours students demonstrated enhanced professional adaptability through service-learning, navigating relational dynamics and reflecting on their practice: one student noted, "*The feedback from my group and mentor helped me engage more meaningfully with learners.*" Life design approaches were successfully adapted to multilingual, culturally grounded settings, allowing learners to author career narratives aligned with their values and aspirations, as one learner expressed: "*I could explain what I like and want to do, and they understood me.*" Finally, Ubuntu-informed practices reinforced the ethical and relational dimensions of career guidance, fostering dignity, collective support, and belonging. These findings collectively substantiate the RCCF as a robust framework for designing career guidance interventions that are relationally, contextually, and ethically responsive

Conclusion

Theoretical Innovation and Global Contribution

The Relational-Contextual Career Framework (RCCF) represents a theoretical innovation by explicitly integrating relational, contextual, and ethical dimensions within career guidance and service-learning pedagogy. Unlike traditional career development models that often emphasise individual agency or linear skill acquisition, the RCCF foregrounds the co-construction of meaning, multilingual engagement, and Ubuntu-informed ethics as central to professional practice. By connecting its core theoretical pillars—relational social constructionism, career construction and life design, and Ubuntu—to practical applications and intended outcomes, the framework shows how relational, language-sensitive and culturally responsive approaches can actively support learners' participation, foster inclusion, and nurture social responsibility. This innovation has relevance beyond the South African context, offering a conceptual model for globally situated community engagement and career guidance that is culturally responsive, ethically grounded, and adaptable to multilingual, diverse learning environments, thus subsequently contributing to decolonising and equity-oriented theories of practice. In addition, the RCCF not only informs classroom practice but also has the potential to guide institutional community engagement frameworks, promoting ethical, relationally grounded and inclusive service-learning initiatives across universities.

Contributions and Added Value

This study made contributions to both theory and practice by empirically validating the RCCF. It showed how relational, contextual and ethical considerations could be operationalised in multilingual career guidance. A practical model for service-learning pedagogy was provided, integrating language-sensitive facilitation, life design, and career construction approaches in Global South contexts. The study highlighted the importance of valuing learners' linguistic and cultural resources as assets for inclusive, equitable, and socially responsible career guidance. Beyond the immediate classroom context, the RCCF offers guidance for institutional community engagement strategies. By foregrounding relational, linguistic, and ethically grounded practices, universities can design CE initiatives that are inclusive, culturally responsive and socially accountable, ensuring that service-learning programmes contribute meaningfully to both student development and community needs.

Implications for Policy and Curriculum Development

The findings of this study offer practical guidance for higher education institutions seeking to strengthen community engagement programmes. By demonstrating how relational, language-sensitive and ethically grounded approaches enhance learner participation and honours students' professional development, the RCCF provides a blueprint for curriculum design, facilitator training and programme structure in service-learning initiatives. Institutions could integrate RCCF principles into CE curricula to ensure that programmes systematically promote inclusive, culturally responsive and socially accountable practices, while also preparing students to navigate diverse community contexts effectively.

Limitations

The following limitations were identified in the study:

- Limitation of generalising findings since data is based on a single high school context.
- Participants' responses could be influenced by social desirability, particularly given the relational nature of the intervention.
- Language proficiency among honours students varied, and the study did not measure the impact of varying levels of multilingual competence on learners' engagement systematically.
- Finally, the relatively short duration of the career guidance sessions constrained the depth of longitudinal impact assessment.

Strengths

The study presented data employed from both learner focus groups and honours students' reflections, therefore providing data from various perspectives. The study demonstrated the use of translanguaging and localisation of career theories, bridging theory and practice.

An ethically grounded, culturally responsive approach that aligned with contemporary calls for decolonising education and career guidance in multilingual contexts was highlighted by embedding Ubuntu-informed relational practices.

Recommendations

Based on the findings, the study offers several recommendations:

1. **Curriculum and Pedagogical Training:** Higher education institutions should provide explicit training for service-learning facilitators and guidance counsellors on translanguaging, audience-sensitive communication, and culturally responsive career guidance.
2. **Structured Language Support:** Facilitators should be equipped with resources and strategies to manage language diversity, including basic proficiency in learners' home languages and multimodal materials.
3. **Longer and Iterative Engagement:** Career guidance interventions should allow for extended and iterative sessions to deepen engagement, reflection, and learner self-concept development.
4. **Ubuntu-Informed Practices:** Career guidance should integrate relational and ethical principles that foreground collective learning, mutual respect, and learner dignity.
5. **Scaling and Transferability:** Future research should test the applicability of these approaches across multiple schools and contexts to evaluate transferability and long-term outcomes.
6. **Higher education institutions:** Higher education institutions may consider embedding RCCF principles into formal CE policies and staff development programmes to strengthen relational and context-sensitive approaches to community engagement.

Summary

This study explored how honours students delivering career guidance to grade 9 learners in underprivileged high schools navigated language barriers, relational dynamics, and contextualised pedagogies. Guided by the Relational-Contextual Career Framework (RCCF), the findings highlight that language, relational sensitivity, and culturally responsive facilitation are central to effective career guidance. Translanguaging emerged as a critical strategy, enabling learners to participate meaningfully and co-construct understanding, while service-learning supported honours students' professional adaptability, reflective practice and ethical engagement. Ubuntu-informed practices further underscored the importance of relational dignity, collective learning, and learner inclusion in career guidance.

AI-Use Declaration

The author affirms that ChatGPT was used solely for language editing and improving clarity. All research design, analysis, interpretation and conclusions presented in this article are entirely the author's own work.

Notes on Contributor

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