

ASPIRE YOUTH: PERSONALISED PATHWAYS FROM TRAUMA TO ENTERPRISE

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INTRODUCTION

Aspire Youth in Cape Town offers one of the clearest examples I've seen of genuinely personalised economic empowerment. Their work is rooted in a simple but powerful insight:

“Economic opportunity only lasts if a young person is emotionally and psychologically ready to sustain it.”

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Unlike many programmes that focus on short skills courses or entrepreneurship workshops, Aspire insists on holding mental health, trauma, safety, skills and income together in one integrated journey. What struck me most during my visit was something Roslin (Ros) Falatsa, Aspire Programme Lead said:

“From Fit for Life, to incubation, to launch, you are adapting to the individual's situation, their needs, their passion, their skills. And you're not abandoning them.”

That refusal to “abandon” young people is what makes Aspire distinctive in my view.



Suresh with the Aspire Youth team

THE STARTING POINT: FIT FOR LIFE

Aspire's work begins with Fit for Life, a phase that focuses on identity, trauma, and emotional readiness, rather than jumping straight into business. As Ros explained:

"Fit for Life is making sure that you are fit for life. We work on who I am, my sense of belonging, and what role I play in this world... If we just say, 'we'll teach you this and give you money to start a business,' we are setting them up for failure."

The content addresses identity and belonging - questions like *Who am I? Where do I come from?* - as well as self-awareness, personal agency, and unresolved trauma or mental health issues.

If a participant encounters a trauma trigger (for example, a memory of sexual assault resurfacing for the first time) the programme does not push them through the curriculum. Instead, it slows down for that individual. Two people may start together and finish months apart, and this is considered a success, not a failure.

GUIDES: "SOMEONE WHO HAS MY BACK"

Each young person is matched with a guide from their own township. This is not a token mentoring relationship; it is the backbone of Aspire's model. Guides understand the township economy, informal work, gangs, and domestic pressures. They have often worked through their own trauma and, importantly, are reachable in real life (nights, weekends or moments of crisis).

When someone "disappears," Aspire doesn't simply mark them as a dropout. They go and find out why. In one case Ros described, a participant stopped coming to sessions, and people assumed she had lost interest. When Aspire followed up, they discovered she was in hiding because the man who had raped her eight years earlier had been released from prison.

These are typical situations. The goal is always reconnection, not closure.

Despite the complexity of their context (poverty, gang exposure and family instability) Aspire maintains an approximate 85% completion rate. Many of those who leave early do so for positive reasons: jobs, funded study or relocation.

THRESHOLD: REAL CHOICES, NOT BUZZWORDS

At the Threshold stage, Aspire helps each young person choose a path that fits:

- Employment
- Further study
- Starting or growing a business

This is a deliberate response to a national tendency to treat "entrepreneurship" as a universal solution. As Mark, AspireYouth's founder, put it:

"South Africa was very quick to grab onto 'entrepreneurship' as a buzzword. We will never just do a three-week business course. 'Entrepreneur' is a very particular mindset. You can still run a good business without being that."

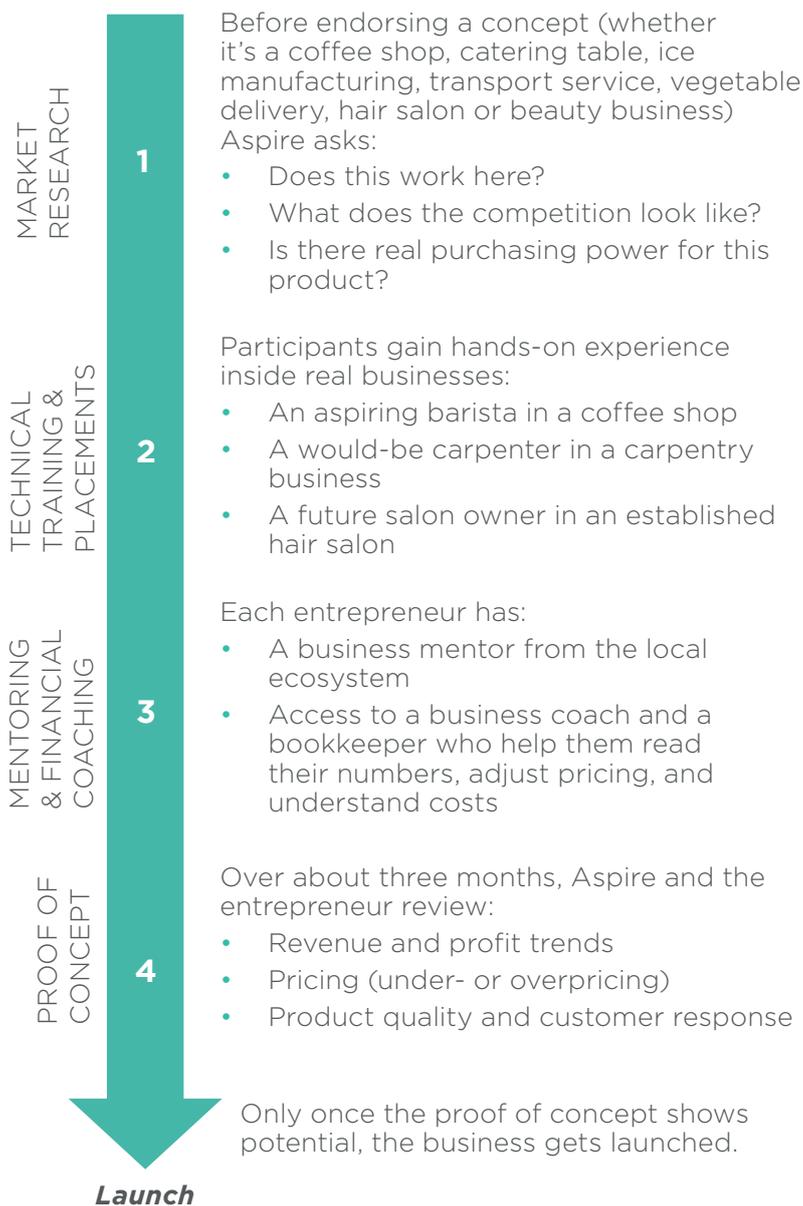
Some participants combine paths; for instance, taking a basic job to cover rent while building a side hustle that can later move into the incubator.

THE INCUBATOR AND INNOVATION HUB

For those choosing the business route, Aspire's Innovation Hub and incubator support young people to turn informal hustles into more sustainable enterprises. Our grant will fund the 12-month Incubator Programme, enabling 35 young people to launch micro-businesses. With an 85% success rate, graduates typically earn R8,000-R12,000 per month within 18 months, contributing to lasting community change.

Funding:
\$20,000

Key elements of the support include:



CASE STUDIES

Rethabile Hoffman: Recovery to Stability

When Aspire first met Rethabile, she was coping with abuse through drug use, living in unsafe conditions, and raising two children with no stable income. Today, after completing Fit for Life, guidance, and incubation, she runs a "side hustle" catering and snack stand at a busy taxi rank, selling sandwiches, coffee, tea, cool drinks, and muffins. She also works one day a week for Aspire Youth. Rethabile is now in the launch phase of her dream electrical appliance repair business, with continued coaching and support from Aspire.

Sue Ellen of Sue's Sweets and Treats: A Household Transformed

Another graduate entered Aspire from a home with zero income; she and her partner were struggling with excessive alcohol use and raising their children. Five years later, she earns around 8,000 Rand per month, and her baking business brings in roughly 3,000 Rand per month. Sue Ellen and her partner are now married, and he has also secured employment. Their combined household income is approximately 19,000 Rand per month (\$1,200), eight times the average in the area.

GROWING LEADER FROM WITHIN

Aspire's internal team reflects their commitment to local ownership. They currently have a staff team of 12, nine are former participants who came through the incubator as interns. This builds leadership rooted in the same communities they serve, with lived experience and deep credibility.

Aspire Youth's work is complex, patient and deeply human. It shows that when trauma, trust and opportunity are held together (rather than treated as separate issues) young people don't just survive harsh conditions; they begin to reshape them.



life changing