

CENTRE FOR
SOCIAL SCIENCE RESEARCH

Social Surveys Unit

THE STUFF THAT DREAMS ARE MADE
OF... NARRATIVES ON EDUCATIONAL
DECISION-MAKING AMONG YOUNG
ADULTS IN CAPE TOWN

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CSSR Working Paper No. 190

May 2007

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Acknowledgements:

I would like to acknowledge funding from the National Institute of Child Health and Development and the National Institute of Aging (Grant R01 HD045581-01).

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Abstract

This paper examines the narratives of eight young, Black South Africans on their decisions around education. Analysis focuses on these young adults' value of education on the one hand, and the parallels or breaches between that value and education-related choices or actions on the other. It shows that educational decision-making should be regarded as part of a larger process of identity-formation. I argue that the young people in my sample choose different strategies in attempts to create their identity. One such strategy implies a long-term oriented focus on success; choosing in favour of education is an intrinsic part thereof. Another one rests on a more short-term oriented wish for the same type of success, however with little or no concrete plans on how to reach that. The importance of education is not openly rejected by young adults adapting this second strategy, yet it is not a central factor in it either. Strategies such as these are, however, not static, and the distinction between them not as unambiguous as may seem. Shifting factors in a context of 'fragility' may lead young adults to rethink their choices and plans; many move between different strategies, or create 'in-between' versions that leave room for adaptation when necessary.

Introduction and Background

In South Africa, gaps in schooling outcomes of children from different racial and socio-economic backgrounds have mainly been explained by economic and sociological studies of a quantitative nature. Results indicate the impact of household structure, such as number of siblings and gender of the household head on children's educational outcomes (Anderson and Lam 2003; Case and Ardington 2005). Equally, level of education within the household has been found to have a significant impact on schooling results (Anderson 2000 and 2005; Anderson et al. 2001; Case and Deaton 1999; Lam 1999), as have school and neighbourhood characteristics (Van Der Berg and Louw 2006; Lam 1999). However, work in these traditions rarely considers children and young adults as active decision-makers in matters to do with their schooling. It thereby conveys the understanding that they are merely passively undergoing their socio-economic and family environment, and overlooks the potential influence of individual-level factors such as their values and traits in the decision-making process around their schooling.

Psychological and motivational studies have nevertheless indicated the importance of such factors. Quantitative research into the lower schooling outcomes of minority groups in the United States and Europe has, for example, shown that learners' beliefs about the purpose, meaning and value of education influence the efforts put into schooling, school choice and broader educational outcomes (Chavous et al. 2003; Eccles and Wigfield, 2002; Francis and Archer 2005; Mickelson 1990; Noack 2004; see also De Lannoy 2006). Analyses using Eccles' 'expectancy-value model' (1982;1983), for example, found that one's perception of the value of an activity (i.e. either a specific school subject, or going to school in general) is important in determining one's decision to engage in that activity (Eccles and Wigfield 2002). Similarly, Chavous et al. (2003) found that young people's view on the relevance and the efficacy of schooling has a positive impact on school engagement. In this regard, however, Mickelson (1990) had earlier pointed at the importance of distinguishing between people's *abstract* and *concrete* values around education. In doing so, the author explains the paradox of 'consistently positive attitudes towards education [and] frequently poor academic achievement' among Black American students. Results of Mickelson's study indicated that students' academic achievement is linked to their *concrete* attitudes towards education, i.e. their 'accurate assessment of the returns that their education is likely to bring them as they make the transition to adulthood' (ibid: 12).

Apart from this impact of young people's attitude towards schooling directly, Chavous et al. (2003) further established that the way in which young adults

define their 'group membership' - i.e the way in which they position themselves within the broader community and towards peer groups - has an impact on school engagement.

These quantitatively supported findings on the importance of attitudes and, in the case of Chavous et al. (2003), on ways of defining one's identity and position in society, resonate findings of a tradition of much more qualitative, ethnographic studies. Some of the most influential studies therein are those by Willis (1977) and MacLeod (1987, 1995). Both focused especially on the context of labour and lower middle class young men who chose to disengage from education and the educational achievement ideology. 'The Lads' in Willis' work and 'The Hallway Hangers' in MacLeod's were found to formulate what Willis termed a 'counter school culture'. They rejected what would be the official ideology around education, i.e. that reaching higher levels of education would eventually lead them to a more equal socio-economic position within their society (Willis 1977; MacLeod 1987). Such findings resemble the theories of Ogbu (1985) on an 'oppositional identity' among African American learners: an identity construed out of opposition to a dominant white society that offers no possibility for upward mobility to those who are not White. Interestingly, however, both the 'Lads' and the 'Hallway Hangers' are white. In MacLeod's study, 'The Brothers' are a group of African American young men who, in contrast to 'The Hallway Hangers', do not so readily display an 'oppositional identity'. Instead, they maintain high aspirations, positive values towards education and optimism for a better future. They do, however, eventually not fare that much better in terms of upward mobility than 'The Hallway Hangers'. Yet, while 'The Brothers' had perhaps not managed to materialise their aspirations to the full, they had managed to stay away from the paths of substance abuse, crime and unemployment that became part of most of 'The Hallway Hangers'' lives. In their search for dignity, they had maintained hard work and attempts to reach higher levels of education, even though faced with racism and the prospect of job-insecurity and low wage pay. 'The Hallway Hangers' on the other hand, paralleling Willis' lads, had found dignity in resisting dominant social values.

Whereas Willis' and MacLeod's studies offer very useful insights into the importance of attitudes and the dynamics of resistance towards a dominant ideology, they do not readily explain why some young people from a specific racial or social class background do *not* reject a dominant educational ideology, nor do they explain why some do 'make it' through school and into the stream of upward mobility (cf. also Gayles 2005). More recent research has therefore begun to look into what has been termed 'academic achievement as a form of resistance' (Gayles 2005: 251). US based research looking into achievement among Latino and Afro American youth, for example, has situated 'academic

achievement as a transformative act' (ibid; Cammatora 2004) and analyses strategies of 'academic resilience' among 'successful youth'.

Taking into account the value of both of these qualitative approaches, this study aims to understand not only those young people in the Black South African communities that 'disengage' with schooling, but also looks into the narratives of young people - both men and women - who do choose to invest their time and energy in schooling. Narratives of eight young adults are therefore analysed in order to gain an understanding on the way in which young Black African adults in an impoverished urban setting make decisions about their education:

- How they perceive the value of education;
- Whether and how they act upon that value: to what extent does the value of education play a role in their educational decision-making?

Based on the findings of the above mentioned studies, it is clear that the value of education and educational decision-making relates in many ways to the manner in which young people perceive their socio-economic, racial, historical, and future context, and how they define themselves within that context. Hence, this paper will refer also, with a limited body of data and literature on youth, to 'growing up' and identity formation in South Africa.

In the following sections of the paper, I will first describe the method of sampling, interviewing and analysis. The paper will then briefly focus on some of the circumstances shaping young adults' lives and educational decision-making today. Time and space limits for this paper obstruct an all-inclusive overview of what it means to be 'young in South Africa', hence the section merely tries to offer introductory facts that allow the findings of the current study in to be somewhat contextualised.

Area and Sample Selection

The sample for this micro study consisted of eight young adults, aged between fourteen and twenty-two, all of whom have in the recent year made significant decisions around their education¹. I chose to concentrate on the youth from Black African communities, as they are most often mentioned with regards to

¹ Positive decision-making was defined as choosing to stay in school and put significant efforts into education, looking for or taking part in special projects, etc. The option of permanently dropping out of school was termed negative decision-making, as was truancy, the absence of taking any constructive actions in school, or showing destructive behaviour, and the conveying of negative or discouraging messages around education.

the lower educational outcomes in the country and the existing gap between the population groups.

All young people were either from Khayelitsha, Nyanga, Gugulethu or Philippi, Black African townships that constitute the majority of low-income, urban settlements around Cape Town.



Two core respondents were selected through the author's earlier work with the non-governmental organisation Southern African Environmental Program (SAEP)². Both are highly motivated young women who just rewrote their matric exams to better their results and who had at the time of the interview entered application procedures at the University of Cape Town and the University of the Western Cape. Other respondents were selected through snowballing: the intention was to reach a number of young people from the same socio-economic background, possibly friends or students at the same school, sharing a number of comparable stressors such as peer pressure, school circumstance, etc. some of whom have made similar decisions to remain in school, others who dropped out.

² The Southern Africa Environment Project (SAEP) is a non-governmental, educational organisation that was founded in the United States in 1994. It has always had a South African branch, and has, since 1999, focused mainly on 'education and leadership development and environmental improvement' in Philippi, Nyanga, Crossroads and Gugulethu. It offers academic support in various schools of the townships, and organises classes in debating, journalism, poetry, computer literacy, etc. It also offers high school graduates a chance to join the organisation as interns to help out with the academic support in the schools, and at the same time enabling them to study and work towards rewriting their matric exams to better their results ([www. saep.org](http://www.saep.org))

Data Collection and Interview Techniques

Data was collected through in-depth, semi-structured interviews with the young adults, after receiving their written consent for the interviews. Most of the interviews were conducted in the presence of one of my core respondents, S., so that, whenever necessary, the respondents could reply in their mother tongue, Xhosa, and S. could translate. In order to gain an understanding of educational decision-making among young people growing up in resource poor settings around Cape Town, questions were asked not only about such decisions, but also about their home situation, their childhood, personality and issues of the communities they are growing up in; a strong focus was also placed on the young adults' experiences with school and the way in which they constructed a value around education, situated within their aspirations and dreams for future life.

As much more time was spent with the core participants of the study, much richer and more detailed information was gathered on them. The fact that S. and I spent hours together in the car, for example, driving around the townships looking for people who had said they would take part in the study or help find other respondents, gave both of us the chance to reveal parts of our personality and lives at times that suited us best. Other respondents were of course confined to the limited space and time of one to two hour interviews in the respondents' houses, or at friendly NGOs who allowed us to use one of their offices, or of supportive colleagues who opened up their homes for us to sit and talk. However, a number of follow up phone calls and talks were made in the weeks following the interview, with the purpose of assessing changes and evolutions in the participants' lives and decisions.

Analysis and Data Representation

Analysis of the data was guided by Miles and Huberman's approach to data analysis. I followed their procedure of first and second-level coding and pattern coding (Miles and Huberman, 1994: 55-72).

After providing a brief introduction to the socio-economic and educational situation in the area of research, the paper sets out to describe the different strategies of young adults around educational decision-making, and, as will become clear, around identity. I use a narrative representation of the young adults' lives in those instances where I feel it is only in the details of their lives that the context to their decision-making can be found (Reissman, 1993).

Educational Decision-Making in Context

The young adults in this study belong to the generation of Black African youth growing up in 'the New South Africa' that officially offers them opportunities for a life of equality, one such opportunity being the 'free and equal access to education' (South African Schools Act 1996). They belong to a generation that was and is expected to build a life different and better from their parental generation. However, many of these young people live in poverty, go to under resourced schools and are confronted with levels of community violence that renders them often insecure about their own chances in life. They are trying to construct their lives and identities in the still problem-abundant streets of the Cape Flat townships.

1. The Cape Flats: A Socio-Economic Sketch

All of the respondents live in the stretch of townships ranging from Nyanga through to Khayelitsha that starts about fifteen kilometres to the Southeast of the Cape Town City Centre. 'The Flats' were established after the former Apartheid Government's Group Areas Act of 1950. They became home to all 'people of colour' who were no longer allowed to live within the inner city areas that became denominated 'Whites only' areas. The large townships of Khayelitsha and Gugulethu, for example, were established as the result of forced government relocations and informal settlement.

Today, it is estimated that the whole of the Cape Flats area houses about 64% of the total population of the Western Cape Province (Cummins 2003). The 2001 Census data pictures very similar poverty-stricken, overpopulated situations for all the townships that feature in this study. Between 40 and 60% of the houses in the area are informal dwellings or shacks. Approximately 35% of all households do not have access to piped water within their dwelling or yard. More than a quarter of the households live without a flush or chemical toilet and approximately 22% of all households live without electricity.



Informal settlements in Khayelitsha – source: <http://goafrica.about.com/>

In all of the townships included in the sampling area, less than a quarter of the adult population (i.e. people above the age of 20) has completed Grade 12 of their education. Figures released by the Western Cape Province of Education in 2006 indicated alarmingly high illiteracy rates among previously disadvantaged communities, and showed that literacy among grade 6 pupils in the province was as low as 42% (see <http://wced.wcape.gov.za>).

According to the Census 2001 data, the official unemployment rate in the area of the Cape Flats ranges between 50 and 60%, and of those who have work, the majority are employed in either ‘elementary occupations’ (40%), or as a sales person (15%) or craft trade worker (13%).

Unemployment rates among South African youth in general are estimated at an appalling 40 to almost 60%. Among Black African youth aged fifteen to thirty, an estimate of close to 60% is unemployed (Lam et al. 2005). In the Western Cape Province, youth unemployment is estimated at about 50% (Ministry of Finance 2005).

The vast majority of the households in the Cape Flats are earning less than R1600 per month – in Philippi for example, close to 80%. Less than 1.5% of the households in the area earn more than R6400 per month.

Leading causes of death in the area indicate the high prevalence of HIV and of violent crime. According to the Western Cape Government, the leading cause of

death over the period of 2002 to 2005 in Khayelitsha and Nyanga, was HIV/AIDS (24% and 16% respectively), followed by assault of any nature (13.5% and 16% respectively). TB was responsible for 8.5% and 7.3% of deaths in these two townships (City of Cape Town, Health Services, 2007). Figures on leading causes of death for the whole of the Western Cape indicate that homicide or violence was the leading cause of death for men in 2000 (Bradshaw et al. 2005).

2. Educational Supply Side

The supply side of the South African education system today still shows remnants of the inequalities of its apartheid past. Despite relatively high public expenditures on education³, public schools in the country still have to supplement their government funding by school fees and other (private) funds in order to be able to cover costs incurred by ‘maintain(ing) school buildings and services, pay(ing) electricity, water and telephone accounts and purchas(ing) equipment such as blackboards, chalk and paper.’ (Giese et al., 2003: 188; Cassiem and Streak, 2001). In poorer schools, however, infrastructure is still a major problem.

The Department of Education keeps track of the infrastructure provisioning for schools through the National School Register of Needs Survey. In 2002, 35.2% of all school buildings were classified as ‘weak’ or ‘very weak’; approximately 35% of all South African schools were without telephones; 29% had no access to potable water, and in some provinces this percentage even went up to approximately 42%; 45% of all schools nationwide had no access to electricity; 9.2% had no access to toilets (Wildeman, 2004; cf. also The Children’s Institute 2006). Furthermore, in 2000, it was estimated that the number of un(der)qualified teachers in the South African educational system was nationally at a level of 22%; the Western Cape rate was 11% (Bot 2001).

Classrooms, especially in poorer areas, are also often overcrowded. In a study on ‘Factors affecting teaching and learners’, close to 60% of educators in urban informal areas indicated they were teaching classes of more than 46 students. Figures for the Western Cape indicated that more than 70% of educators were teaching classes of more than 36 learners (Phurutse 2005). With respect to educators, a study by the Human Science Research Council has found that large

³ According to the Human Development Report of 2004, South Africa spent 5.6% of its GDP on education in the period between 1999 and 2001. As a matter of comparison: the United States spent 5.6% of its GDP on education, the United Kingdom 4.6%, for that same period (UNDP 2004).

numbers of educators are considering leaving their jobs because of job dissatisfaction, high stress levels due to violence in schools, large classrooms and the consequences of HIV and AIDS (Hall et al. 2005).

Evidently, schools in poorer areas of the country that have to survive on lower fees find it more difficult to maintain the same standards of quality as those in richer areas and suffer more readily from the aforementioned shortages and problems. As a result, parents and young adults may look outside their immediate area of residence for alternatives for their under resourced township schools. In her ethnographic work on youth in New Crossroads, Ramphele states: ‘increasingly parents living in New Crossroads were giving up on the township school system and sending their children to schools outside the township. They clearly felt unable to do anything about the nearby schools and saw the opening as an opportunity’. (Ramphele, 2002: 94 – see also Bray et al., forthcoming).

Apart from a shortage of resources, many schools are also prone to problems of violence, gang-related crime, drugs and alcohol (Brookes, Shisana et al. 2004; Bennell, Hyde et al. 2002; Giese, Meintjes et al. 2003; Human Rights Watch 2001; Kelly 2000; Irinnews 2005). In this respect, the South African Human Rights Commission recently started an ‘Inquiry into School Based Violence in South Africa’ (2006) as it is believed that ‘the results of (sexual, gang and other) school based violence are reflected by the large number of school drop outs, academic underperformance, increased risk of teenage pregnancy and the transmission of HIV and AIDS amongst youth and overall community disintegration’ (South African Human Rights Commission 2006: 3).

In the Western Cape, the Department of Education set up the ‘Safe Schools Programme’ in an attempt to deal with the problem of violence and lack of safety in school. The programme provided approximately one hundred schools with security infrastructure, including ‘remote controlled gates with CCTV cameras, intercom systems, safety drills and burglar bars’ (Kassiem 2006a). However, towards the end of 2006, newspapers headlined ‘Schools unsafest place for kids’. Testimonies provided at the South African Human Rights Commission on violence in schools, ‘referred to weapon-wielding pupils, drug binges during breaks, and pupils inflicting violence, as well as the rape of teachers’ (Kassiem 2006b). One of the incidents mentioned by both one of the respondents and the newspapers, was the attack on one of the pupils at Oscar Mpetha High School in Nyanga, in November 2006, in which outsiders to the school had jumped the school’s fences and stabbed one of learners in his classroom. Security officials had been present in the school but unable to stop the attack (incident mentioned in interview with Alutha, 2006; cf. also Kassiem and Ka Nzapheza 2006).

3. Young Adults' Attitudes Towards Education

Young adults in the Cape Area Panel Study (CAPS)⁴ expressed a strong belief in the value of education. More than 99% replied that they believed that education is 'very important', with almost no differentiation when looking at the results by population group. Even when breaking down this general belief in education in perhaps more individual and 'societal' instrumental values around schooling, the majority of respondents would still agree with the facts that:

- People who have received an education can help develop the country (93%)
- Education is important for one's chances to get an interesting job (89%)
- One has no future without education (72%)
- Children learn respect at school (67%)
- School keeps children away from crime (64%)
- Education enables people to take better care of their family (76%)
- School is where one learns discipline (70%)
- Educated people can earn more (82%)
- Educated people are admired by others (72%)

The one statement eliciting lower levels of agreement was the one that said that 'people with an education could not be discriminated against' (45% agreement)⁵.

Strikingly, however, in accounts of teachers and other (educational) professionals working with young adults, there is little or no reflection of these high values of education among young adults. In interviews with educators in the Black African townships, many would refer to young people's disinterest in schooling, lack of focus and motivation (personal interviews during 2006). These stories mirror findings of the work by Pager (1996) on 'the culture of learning in Khayelitsha secondary schools'. In her work around that 'culture of learning', Pager referred to the frequently mentioned low motivation and

⁴ CAPS consists of various survey waves interviewing an original panel of almost 5000 adolescents (aged 14-22 in 2002, the start of the study) several times over a period of at least 5 years. The survey has been designed to gather more specific information on young people in the Cape Metropolitan Area. It focuses especially on determinants of schooling, unemployment and earnings of young adults.

⁵ Statistical analysis of the impact of attitudes towards education on enrolment and attainment are subject of a following, more quantitatively oriented paper. Figures are here mentioned only to provide an introductory understanding of the value of education expressed by young people in the Cape Town Metropolitan Area.

laziness of students. The attitude of young people towards school was described by teachers as ‘anti-academic and destructive’, resulting in ‘chaos, lack of discipline and demoralisation ... in many township schools’ (ibid: 7). Educators explained these attitudes among young people mostly by referring to the absence of motivation at home, impoverished living circumstances that do not create a context that can be conducive to learning, abuse, violence, loss of caregivers, etc (Pager 1996; also own interviews 2006).

This paper aims to move away from the understanding of such culture of and attitude towards learning as seen through the eyes of those who work with young people. Instead, it wishes to gain a deeper understanding of the apparently high value of education among young adults through analysis of *their own* narratives around their life paths and the place of education therein.

However, in one short section, before moving to these narratives, I wish to draw attention to the concept of fragility as defined by Henderson (1999) in her ethnographic work with young people growing up in the township of New Crossroads, as it becomes a central element also in the stories of my young respondents’ lives.

Fragile Worlds, Fragile Choices

All of the above mentioned elements of the context of ‘being young’ in South Africa, and many more, I believe, can be summarised in what Henderson (1999) called ‘fragility’. In her work investigating the social context of young people growing up in the deprived township of New Crossroads, she defined fragility by the understanding that ‘children’s worlds can ‘shatter’’, yet maintaining also ‘children’s strength and improvisation in the face of discontinuities. ... Fragility then, is linked to fluidity and it is out of a social context characterised by discontinuity and flux that children’s senses of self emerge as multiple and variable’ (Henderson 1999: 25). The author points at the way in which fragility and strength combine in the children’s lives, and at the actions they and their families take to achieve often high-set values and aims, to search for ‘coherence’ in life, to attempt to reconstitute broken (family) bonds, etc. ‘It is argued, however, that the cultural repertoires they employed to ‘restitch’ the social fabric were unable to effect an end point in the process’ (Henderson 1999: p iii). ‘Theirs is a series of reconstitutions ... to which there is seldom a complete resolution’ (ibid: p. 163).

Aspects of fragility and the absence of complete resolution are reflected in the stories of my participants. In my work, I focus particularly on the different ways

in which young adults make decisions around their education within a world characterised by such fragility. By doing so, I will eventually construct a slightly differing definition than the one Henderson used; fragility becomes the compound of 'fluid' social relationships, economic pressures and inequalities, crime and violence, the temptations and influences of, and frustrations caused by a globalised, materialistically-oriented society that offers young people today a myriad of choices, yet in the absence of strong guidance and evidence on the outcomes of such choices. Fragility is heightened by the fact that such choices often have to be made in the absence of strong guidance and of evidence on their outcomes. Hence, I argue that not only the youngsters' world, but also their choices are rendered fragile.

Narratives on Educational Decision-Making⁶

At the time of the interview, three of the respondents had completed matric; two were in the process of applying for a place at a tertiary education institution, one had just completed her third year of higher education. Two of the girls dropped out last year, one boy and one girl had decided to drop out over the weeks or months prior to the study; another girl was still enrolled in school but attended classes only occasionally.

Through their stories filter decisions not only around education, but around forming an identity, and choosing a path of life within the context of resource poor environments and a city that still shows them all the signs of persisting inequality. Unlike the young adults described by Willis (1977), I did not hear a straight out rejection of the dominant school ideology, nor a clear and determined identification with a specific, confident class culture that would allow for such rejection. Instead, I heard a lot of echoes of the fragility described by Henderson (1999), of a lack of guidance on the promised path to 'a better life' in the New South Africa. For some, there seems a lot of truth in what Soudien called a 'journey of a dream denied, if not betrayed' (Soudien 2003: 64).

In the young adults' narratives, I identify different strategies in their processes of identity formation and of choice within a context of fragility. It is, however, important to bear in mind that no such strategy can ever be considered static: these descriptions only offer a representation of the young adults' lives at this

⁶ Throughout the paper, pseudonyms have been used to refer to the young adults who took part in this study, in order to protect their identity and ensure their confidentiality.

point in time; whichever small change in the context of ‘fragility’, can lead the youngsters to completely different paths.

I. Positive Educational Decision-making: Finding one’s Pride in a Focus on the Future

Many of the young adults who make positive choices with regards to their schooling talk about the differences between themselves, their lifestyles and that of others around them in the community. They find their pride in those things that differ from what seems to be ‘mainstream township life’. It is a choice for identity that is defined in opposition to ‘the others’: the dominant culture of peers who are said to bunk school because they say ‘at school it’s difficult, it’s boring’. ‘Others’ are said to spend their time ‘just being at home’ or hanging out in the streets, going out, getting drunk ...

‘most of them, they drop out of school; they are hanging around day and night, drinking, smoking, ... most of them are girls... in our communities the girls are the ones that like partying, clubbing, being with boys, drinking, ...’ ... ‘They want to have fun, just to have fun’ (Alutha)

This account of what seems to be a norm of self-destructive behaviour has been found in other research into teenage decision-making. Kahn (2006) for example, illustrated the influence of ‘deviant’ behaviour in the dominant peer culture on young female adolescents’ sexual decision-making. As in the case of educational decision-making, some of the young girls found their pride in countering and resisting that norm and staying true to their own ideals and values of sexual abstinence.

Similarly, the young people in my sample that made and maintained positive choices around their education were those that did not create their identity within the dominant, *current* peer culture. Their focus in life is constructed around an aspired *future*:

‘one day... I want to be the person I want to be’ (Alutha)

Important in these young adults’ narratives is always the presence of ‘a dream’, of having hope, for them to be able to maintain their focus on the future, and not get drawn into their peers’ culture:

‘First, if you are a person, you should have goals. *If you don’t have dreams, you will never be anyone in life.* So you need a dream. ... I see

myself maybe 4 to 5 years to come, having my own office, having the chair that rolls around the office, and all. If you do have *these dreams*, then *that is what keeps you to go on*' (Lindelwa).

In their reference to the importance of dreams as motivators, my respondents' narratives mirror those of the ones registered by Ramphele (2002) in her work with young adults growing up in the deprived township of New Crossroads. Ramphele too noted the importance of *hope* and of consciously practising that hope in the stories of those 'who refuse to give up' and who persevere with the choices in their lives (ibid: 11).

Those dreams and the idea of 'success' are often filled with materialistic elements of higher class life. Ironically, in South Africa, those higher class ambitions resonate many of the characteristics of the life of 'White people': big houses, beautiful cars, a responsible top-level job. Lindelwa's description of her dream above was an example of that, and Alutha says:

'If I would be successful, then I would have my own house, my car, and even at home, it will be a better home'.

These findings are corroborated by those of other researchers. Soudien (2003) remarks: 'Partly as a result of affirmative action, some young blacks feel that the new South Africa offers previously undreamed-of opportunities. In the urban areas, it is the corporate identity that structures their dreams and aspirations. ... Money is essential to young South African adults as a facilitator of the good life, and as the key to demonstrating status' (ibid: 69; referring also to Unilever Institute 2002).

The value of education for these young adults who strive for future success lies in their conviction that without schooling, there is no way to fulfil all the aspects of their dream-future. Education has a clear instrumental function for them:

'Education is very important, most people often say it is the key to success and I fully agree with that. ... without education, my future will not have a very concrete foundation' (Siya, 22)

'... if you want to earn good money you have to have some level of education and matric will not work for you. With matric certificates you just get the menial jobs and they don't pay well.' (Noluthando, 20)

It is important to note, however, that for the young adults who choose to invest in education, 'success' is not only about individual achievement: the majority of them mention their wish to at one point be able to give back to their families:

‘for me, to be a successful person is to give back what I was given, and even give more to the people who were there for me in my education and in my life’ (Alutha, 19).

For some, the desire to ‘give back’ stretches further than their immediate family context, it is aimed also towards the broader community. Also in this aspect of future success, education is seen as instrumental; Khuthala for example expresses the belief that:

‘someone, somewhere out there will benefit from me getting an education’ (fieldnotes on Khuthala, 18).

The wish to help others is strong, and resonates also in the narratives on those young people that they see around them, who ‘get stuck’. Noluthando, for example, tells me that, apart from wanting to further her education so that she could have a career and a life with material wealth, she hopes to be able to start up poetry projects in the townships and to find ways to guide young people and provide them with information about the possibilities to get and further their education:

‘I will be working in a right place and earning money that I want to earn because of my education, and I will be working on promoting the skills of writing in the townships... what I would also like to vision is having a project that provides information to the young ones so that when they finish high school, they can know what they can do’

Further, an almost implicit element in the definition of ‘success’ is the idea of gaining more stability in life; one that is not common to many of those around them, and that, again, cannot be reached without having furthered one’s education. Noluthando puts it explicitly:

‘... I know exactly where I want to go, you know, working towards something, yes it’s nice to have a career. I think it brings stability in your life to be in one place and to work towards something and not jumping from one job to that one. Like, if I was not studying right now, I would probably be working maybe at Pick ’n Pay as a cashier or at Shoprite and you know you won’t stay there long, you have to move from this job to the next’ (Noluthando, 20)

Strikingly, but undoubtedly motivated by the heritage of under-education among their parents’ generation as a consequence of the past regime’s divided educational policy, only few of the young adults build their positive ideology and activities concerning education on concrete examples of people in their

family. Indeed, few people can. Noluthando does, however, as she refers to the very clear example of the benefits of education when she looks at the differences in life between her uneducated mother who now works as a domestic worker, and her father who is a teacher and uncle who is a school principal:

‘... My first example is my father who is [better] educated than my mom. He has got a nice house, nice car, and he’s got a stable job, he is able to do things for himself, [not like] my mother. ... Like most of the members of my family who are more educated, you can see that when you have education, you have got something that is stable, and you can make a life for yourself.’

Others will look for examples in the broader community to motivate their choice in favour of education, or, as in Siya’s case, even further:

‘Education is ... the key to success. ... You know, when it comes to knowing, *in those countries internationally*, they say an average person is 24 years with at least 2 degrees.’ (Siya, 22; author’s emphasis).

It is important to note that these young adults look at success as a future to be gained. They choose to ‘endure’ their current situation, and are realistic about the fact that an investment of their time into schooling today and in the next few years, will only show its benefits in the years to come. This mirrors Gayles’ (2005) finding in a study on ‘academic resilience among three high-achieving African American males’, of the fact that academic achievement was these young men’s ‘chosen strategy for fulfilling future aspirations’; ‘academic achievement [was seen] as *prospectively meaningful*, if not currently transformative’ (Gayles 2005: 256, 257).

Practising the Value: Choosing Individual Over Group Identity?

Although for many of these young people success includes an altruistic element and their dreams include the wish to be able to help others, many describe being faced with their communities’ scorn and name-calling because of their choice in favour of education. Both Lindelwa and Siya mention standing up for their ideals and aspirations, even when that evokes name-calling:

‘*It’s hard for you to be who you want to be, without being judged by the others* and... like, you can’t be free and act like the person you want to be at the time you want to be’. ... ‘I like to stay at home, I don’t like to go to

every, each and every bar, ... and they would go to say that I am 'madam', they even call me that' (Lindelwa , 18 – author's emphasis).

'If you don't go for drugs, like, .. now you are like an outcast if you are not one of them' (Siya, 22).

Siya further describes how he was 'dubbed Mr. Fezeka High' for doing well in school and for being able to take part in international events such as the Maths Olympiad. The absence of support among friends for his academic achievement eventually made him decide to look for another school:

'I needed to be somewhere new, you know, where no one knew me', so he could concentrate on school work and achievement.

One can question whether this reference to being subject to name-calling perhaps refers to the absence among community members of a belief in the possibility of 'upward mobility of the whole group'. This kind of disbelief was found, for example, among Willis' Lads and the broader labour class: 'To the individual working class person, mobility in this society may mean something. ... To the class or group at its own proper level, however, mobility means nothing at all' (Willis 197: 128).

The fact that young people in South Africa get caught between individuality and community has in any case been mentioned also in previously described literature. Opting for personal achievement in the very poor socio-economic environments of the townships can be seen as 'selling out', or 'acting white'. In *Steering by the Stars*, Ramphela states: 'The enormous pressure put on young people not to stand out extracts a huge price. They are caught between the contradictory forces of solidarity and personal achievement' (p 96).

Hence, remaining faithful to and focused on one's dream, entails careful actions and choices around, among others, friendships and activities. In this respect, Gayles (2005) identified his respondents' strategy to 'actively diminish the significance of their own academic achievement' (ibid: 254) and thereby not place themselves too much outside their peer group. Similar findings came up in research performed in communities in the Cape Town Metropolitan Area by Bray et al. (forthcoming). On the other hand, the example of Siya changing schools to be able to maintain his focus on his work implies that not all young people adapt the same strategies. In her work around sexual abstinence, Kahn found that young women would consciously develop various strategies 'whereby they countered pressures to engage in dominant peer norms and practices, through which they simultaneously retained their personal values and ideals, and also found a means of finding a socially integrated and valued

position amongst peers' (Kahn 2006: 41). Similarly, young people in my sample displayed various and differing strategies of resistance and self-control that allowed them to remain faithful to their choices.

1. Negotiating Friendships

Some of the participants would opt not to get involved with peers who did not make the same choices as them, and would consciously only spend time with those who shared the same motivation and drive:

'A lot of the youth in his neighbourhood are involved in crime, youngsters between the ages of 14 and 25. When I ask him how he feels about that, he says he just keeps away from them: he spends his time at school, at home, in the library (where he reads 'only technology books'), or at the church. When they approach him to ask whether he doesn't want to join them, he just says 'no' and walks away. He keeps to himself and his friends who join him to the library and church, with whom he sits and talks about schoolwork, about home, etc.' (fieldnotes on Thobeka, 15)

Others try to find a balance between belonging to the wider group, yet remaining focused on their personal aims. Self-control then becomes a strong tool:

'I won't say I am not part of the trend - I do go to parties, and I do go out with my friends whenever I have the time - but I think it is all about balancing, having a good time and also knowing what you are doing and where you are going. ... I have to at least have a good time with my friends, *it's not that I don't go to parties but I would never do drugs and I would never chose to be a party animal all my life and not be on the safer side of life, because it would do nothing for me. At the end of the day, I have to be somewhere, so I don't see any life in that*' (Noluthando, 20, author's emphasis).

Noluthando further describes how she tries to balance the need to feel she fits in and belongs to a peer culture that exists today, with her dreams for the future. She combines a strong focus on education with 'a piece job every now and then' that allows her to make some money for herself and contribute to family expenses. It makes her feel good, proud and responsible, and at the same time allows her to be level to her peers and share their 'taste':

'... looking at the kids of the same age as me and you look at them, and see that they have nice cell phones and nice clothes, so you can be able to match, be in the same level as them, it is quite nice..'

Alutha too describes how she does have friends who belong to the more dominant peer culture, yet she manages to maintain her choices by focusing on what she is doing and where she wants to get:

‘Like my friend, I can say she is my closest friend. She dropped out of school and then if I’m doing my school work maybe she won’t understand and would want us to go and have some fun then I’ll just say ‘no, I can’t cause I have to do my homework’. Like to do what I’m planning to do and to do what I want to do not like listening to others and that’s what I’m doing now.’ (Alutha, 19)

Yet, at one point, she may decide to drop that friendship, as she already did with other friends, to protect herself from their influence:

‘we were friends and then because of what they were doing like drinking every day and then the next morning they’ll come to us telling us how the party was good and stuff like that, and *then sometimes you have to stop walking with people like that if we want something in life*’ (W, 19, author’s emphasis).

2. The Importance of Guidance

It is clear, however, that some kind of guidance may be needed in order to be able to choose, develop and maintain long-term oriented strategies and decisions. Noluthando, for example, narrates on her choices around school and the important influence of her family therein: she applied originally for courses in media studies, but was not accepted by UCT. Then, her family would not allow her to move to a school in Durban where she could study what she wanted. When she was not sure of the next steps to take, her parents kept motivating her:

‘I have to study, I have to do something, that’s what my parents said - I have to do something’.

She eventually was allowed to start environmental management at the Cape Technikon. She now loves the fact that she knows a lot about things that other people in the townships know nothing about, and she is proud of the fact that she can teach others new things.

Apart from guidance, there is also the need for some form of external motivation to maintain the rigid divides and constant negotiations between one’s individual aims and the need to feel that relatives or others certainly do still include the

young adults in their network of care and support. Lindelwa, for example, describes the support she receives:

‘My aunt, my uncle ... all of them. If, like, at home, my uncle he will ask ‘how’s things, how’s school, how’s everything?’ He was the first one to wish me good luck for my exams ...’

Alutha describes her home as the most important place, and motivates:

‘I spend much time with my cousins, and they... I can say they are also my friends, I do everything with them, so *even if I don’t have friends outside, I know at least at home I have friends* which are my cousins.’

The similarities between the stories of this group of ‘dreamers’ and those of the successful young adults that were part of Ramphele’s (2002) study are striking. As with the young people mentioned above, the author describes some of her participants as those with ‘a strong sense of self and definite purpose ... They had a firm focus on the future and applied themselves diligently to their education ...’ (ibid. :153). Of other participants she said: ‘the narratives of other members of the group showed a mixture of success and failure as they too steered by the stars into an uncertain future’. Below narratives of young people who saw their decisions around schooling and around their future reversed by their context of fragility illustrate Ramphele’s point.

II. Brittle Decisions: The Consequences of ‘Fragility’ in the Young People’s Stories

Despite the positive orientation towards education and the active search for ways to put that value into practise, there is the influence of what Henderson conceptualised as ‘fragility’ in all of the respondents’ stories: ‘lines of crisis’ that can lead young people away from their aspirations. It leaves them in a situation where they have to struggle further on their own, without anyone really showing them the way. The absence of support networks and guidance can easily lead to a breakdown in the process of identity formation, and to what some might diagnose as depression⁷. Young people’s wish to break out of a situation to reach their goals is still present, but they no longer know exactly

⁷ Studies on mental health of children in the Cape Flats have generally found high levels of internalising distress and of Post Traumatic Stress Disorder symptoms, probably due to high levels of deprivation and of exposure to violence (Barbarin and Richter 2001; Cluver and Gardner 2006; Ensink et al. 1997). It is thus not unthinkable that some of the respondents in the sample who saw their dreams shattered by their circumstances were indeed struggling with certain levels of internalised distress. The interview guide was, however, not designed to diagnose such symptoms, and I can therefore only refer to the indications noted during the interviews.

how to do that, what actions to take and how not to lose their hope and sense of agency. Life becomes characterised by a process of trial and error in which it is very easy to make ‘wrong’ choices – this is young people ‘steering by the stars’ (Ramphela, 2002). This section of the paper will present short case studies to indicate these factors of what can indeed be considered the fragile context of young people’s lives.

Siya

Siya’s story illustrates what can happen when a young, skilled person loses the necessary (financial) support to keep paying for the cost of his education. At the time of the interview, he was twenty-two and living in Gugulethu with his grandmother, his cousin, the cousin’s mother and daughter. His grandmother’s old age grant is the family’s main income, supplemented by Siya’s earnings from small jobs and projects. His siblings live in the Eastern Cape. Both Siya’s parents passed away, leaving a profound impact on Siya’s life and dreams: his mother got sick and died in 1997; his father was shot in Gugulethu in 2003 ‘over nothing... he died for nothing’. His father was the one who had been paying for Siya’s civil engineering study at the Cape Technikon, but after his death, there were no funds for Siya to continue his education. He dropped out.

Throughout the entire interview, Siya placed an enormous emphasis on the importance of education in his life, and the disappointment and feeling of depression of now not being able to further his schooling. He emphasised his dreams, his aspired life away from the poverty he now finds himself stuck in, and the stress caused by not being where he ‘would have wanted to be’:

‘When I was six I always had this dream of driving a car and living in my own flat and that sort of things. You have noticed that I am now 21 years old, those people of my age are having cars and living in their own space and they are not staying with grandmothers, you know those are the sort of things that stress me’.

It is in moments like these that someone like Siya would expect to be able to fall back on broader institutions than just the family: he applied for several funding possibilities, informed the Cape Technikon of what had happened, etc. but never found an entrance back into higher education. Frustrated also about not having been able to start at UCT, Siya refers to the absence of guidance and clarity after having passed his matric, but without the marks required by the UCT engineering faculty.

‘... I went to UCT and they told me to do a bridging programme for one year before, and I said, one year, it was going to be a waste of time. What I am told now (is that) you also happen to do something for one year, but still finish on time. *No one ever tells you about these things*’ (Siya, 22).

Despite the hardships and disappointments, however, Siya described himself as a ‘go getter’, an outgoing person who places a high value in development of the community and who is involved in a number of development projects: ‘I care, and I would like to make a difference in whatever way’. He also does not give up on his dreams, and is in constant search for gaining further skills – he works and then funds short term courses for himself – and wants to start his own ‘home improvement company’.

A similar despair as the one noted in Siya’s story, is found in the narrative of Khuthala, a highly motivated young girl who was determined to further her schooling, but fell pregnant at the age of 17 and now sees no possibilities to make her way back into education, as the little financial support she received at home has to be used to take care of the baby.

Khuthala

Khuthala was eighteen at the time of the interview, the young mother of a one year-old baby boy. She lives in Gugulethu, together with her mother, father, baby and her brother. As a child, she lived in Makhaza, an area of Khayelitsha, but grew up in an abusive situation with a father who drank and abused her mother and left no money for school fees, uniforms or sometimes even food. As a result, she was fetched by her grandfather to go and live in the Eastern Cape, away from the abuse. When her grandparents died, she moved back to Cape Town. Khuthala still describes the current situation in the house in negative terms, wishing she ‘would have a different father, or maybe I had no father’. The relationship with her mother is fine, she tells me, they can talk and she says her mother supported her when she found out she was pregnant.

She describes herself as a kind, observant person, who is curious and ‘hungry for knowledge’, and who loved to go to school. Throughout the interview, she extensively described the importance she attached to education. As in the cases of Siya and Alutha, Khuthala’s constructed value of education contained a number of altruistic elements; she stated: ‘I want to go to school ... I believe that ... I don’t know how, but I believe that once I go to school, someone will benefit from me. I will be able to help someone ... I don’t know who, I don’t know how and I don’t know where...’ The altruism in Khuthala’s reasoning is such that it extends beyond the wish to give back to those close to her. It perhaps reaches to

her entire generation, as she clarifies that, to her, success is also about ‘making history for South Africa’, showing the rest of the world and the older generations in South Africa that even someone out of what she says they call ‘the cursed generation’ can make it.

Khuthala’s statement illustrates a process of constructing an identity in oppositional terms, *not* against the normative belief in the benefits of education, but against the popularly held belief of ‘a lost generation’. Hers is a very different identity-building process than the one displayed by, for example, Willis’ ‘lads’; it is one that emphasise the wish to *transform*, as found among the group of ‘dreamers’ described above, and in the work of for example Gayles (2005).

However, despite Khuthala’s positive attitude towards education, falling pregnant unplanned made her drop out in 2005, when she was in grade 11.

As in Siya’s case, the story around Khuthala’s pregnancy echoes examples of how institutions that are traditionally expected to provide guidance and help, fail today’s youth: her family and home are not a place where she can find safety and stability, the medical services in her area do not provide her with the information and products they are supposed to point her at. Khuthala had known about contraceptives, but when she had gone to the clinic to ask for the pill, the nurses told her they only gave injections:

‘... in our clinics, the nurses are not so nice. You go and tell them ‘no, I don’t want to use an injection, I want to use pills, and they tell you ‘blah blah we’re going to give you injections if you don’t want to, you can just go to hell’.

The unsupportive attitude of those who can provide contraceptives and information about them to teenagers has been documented also in other research: they have been found to be ‘notoriously unsupportive of teens, scolding them for sexual activity and refusing to provide them with contraceptives’ (Kaufman et al. 2000: 8). Khuthala was left to herself to make a decision about the method of contraception within a relationship she considered stable and mature enough not to opt for condom use anymore. She had unprotected sex with her boyfriend of over a year and fell pregnant.

During our talk, Khuthala would repeatedly refer to the fact that she felt she had ‘lost herself’ after the birth of her baby: she could no longer go to school, she had no time to read, or even to think, she had ‘regrets’ and felt ‘stupid’ about having fallen pregnant. These types of feelings were also noted in more specific

research on adolescent childbearing, where girls were found to ‘feel confused about their condition and the options open to them’ (Kaufman et al. 2000: 7).

Yet, as noticed with other young mothers, Khuthala maintained a great belief in the value of education for her further life (ibid: 27-30). At the time of the interview, she was committed not to give up her dreams and tried to convince both me and herself that she would still be able to fulfil her goals:

‘My future ... well, I still have time. It’s not too late, *I can still go to school, I can still pursue my dreams, my goals and I can still get to where I want to be.* ... I’m not just gonna give up just because I have a baby, no, I’m not. I’m still going to go to school... I’m still going to where I want to be ...’

This was not a vague idea or belief, she was considering in very concrete terms to find a part time job, take the baby to crèche and start part time education again in 2007. However, when I spoke to her at the beginning of 2007, she told me ‘something had happened at home’ and she had had to take on a full time job as a sales person in a clothing shop. She asked me to please let her know of any possibilities to combine full time work with still completing and passing her matric year (Grade 12). I forwarded her information about a school in the neighbouring township Langa that offered morning classes at a time that would still allow for people to go working afterwards. I contacted Khuthala again a few weeks later, only to hear a lot of doubt in Khuthala’s voice about whether or not she was going to be able to start at the school: most day classes were full, and night classes happened at a time when lack of reliable transport would make it too dangerous for her attend and make her way back home much later. Khuthala also expressed not being certain of whether or not she would actually be able to combine all the tasks. She had taken no further actions to gain information about other schools or possibilities.

Both Siya’s and Khuthala’s story mirror Ramphele’s observation of the fact that ‘key factors as the family, school and community repeatedly fail’ young people today (Ramphele 2002: 31). In the absence of clarity and support to help them complete their education to levels they feel necessary not only for their future well being, but also to uphold their self-esteem, pride and identity, both Siya and Khuthala expressed different levels of anxiety, of feeling ‘adrift’ and being depressed. They did not lose track of the importance of schooling, but both resort to survival strategies that would allow them to at least earn some money and perhaps in the long run allow them to pick up their education again. It is not hard to imagine how many other young people in situations such as these would lose focus and resort to other, even more short-term oriented activities. Henderson emphasises:

‘A social situation characterised by fragile social relationships demands of children that they be dexterous, resourceful, adaptable, that they take responsibility. Such dexterity can however lead to a lack of focus, a mercurial adaptation to circumstance and a lack of future orientation.’ (Henderson, 1999: 32)

III. Losing Focus: Stories of Negative Decision-Making in a Quest for Belonging?

The stories of the young people who made conscious, positive decisions around their education sounded structured and convinced: there was a plan next to dream, so that dreams did not become mere fantasies. Uncertainty and a loss of orientation sneaked into the narratives of those whose identity formation also rested largely on education, but whose plans shattered through unforeseen events, forced upon them by their context of ‘fragility’. Finally then, there are the stories of those young respondents who did not opt to invest, or to keep on investing in education. They sound more chaotic and troubled than either of the previous stories, and contain more elements of the need to belong to a peer group and the desire to escape the hardships of present day township life.

The ‘Others’: Living Another ‘Culture’?

The narratives created around the dominant culture of ‘the others’ by the first group of youngsters were a mixture of referring to a culture oriented towards the West, a US-based styling of clothes, brands, music ... that provides people of all ages, not just the most youthful ones, with an identity and pride:

‘Siya: We want to live their culture;

X: We want to live their culture and abandon our culture;

Siya: That’s the American way of doing things, you know, everyone wants to do the American way;

X: And also it bestows dignity on you if a child of that age wears labels like that, and you are wearing labels, the community will salute you.’ (Focus group with Siya, Nandipha, and community worker X, December 2006)

Remarks like these clearly mirror findings in Dolby’s work (2000; 2001), who looked into the experiences and choices around identity of young people in a formerly ‘White’, now officially ‘multiracial’ school in Durban, South Africa. Dolby emphasises the importance of ‘taste’ in creating one’s identity, the

expression of one's group or racial identity by elements of a popular culture, such as fashion and music. Dolby remarks that the positioning of that taste happens not only in a local but especially in a global context: these are expressions of taste that are 'not connected to any trajectory related to [African] politics, history or culture in South Africa' (ibid 2000:13).

This culture of the 'others', furthermore, seems one that demands an immediate and material expression of well-being. Rather than working towards well-being in the longer-term oriented way that the group of 'dreamers' is willing to do, this group looks for instant gratification and relief out of their context of structural poverty. It is a peer culture that by the first group of young adults is described in gendered terms, with boys and young men turning to crime, drugs and alcohol, and girls to smoking, drinking or to the lethargic 'just hanging around' – choices of life paths that by researchers and press would invariably be described as 'problematic'.

It is said sometimes that these young people do not 'see that education is important'. However, it is also suggested that it is difficult for some children to find their place in run-down schools with a lot of disciplinary problems, not necessarily very motivated teachers and principals, and surrounded by pressure-exerting peers. It is further said that some children lack real support and understanding at home in order to remain motivated to 'endure' and see the long term benefits of school.

From below stories, it appears that negative decisions around education are indeed driven by a chaotic mixture of many of these factors. One important difference with the general belief held by the first group of young people, however, is the absence of a strongly formulated disbelief in the benefits of education. Even in the case of Nezile, who for himself would say 'there is nothing in education for me', there is the idea that education would indeed lead to a situation that could be better than the one he finds himself in now, and that his own mother would definitely have had a better life, had she been able to read and write, and had the chance to go to school:

'The thing that upsets me the most is that my grandmother, she never went to school, ok. Why did she not want her children to go to school because she never went to school? Doesn't she want them to get better education?'

This remaining belief in education is, however, less convinced and gets perhaps more readily tested by the realities of township life – more refer to the high rates of unemployment among the youth in the townships, even among those who have furthered their education.

a. Wanting to Live the Fast Life? – The Boys

Nezile

Nezile is nineteen. He shares a house with his mother, stepfather, stepbrother and the latter's girlfriend in Ekuphumleni in Khayelitsha. His biological father lives in Johannesburg and there seems little contact between the boy and his father. Nezile describes his home situation as problematic, with not always high levels of understanding between him and the adults in the house. He refers to abusive situations in the past in which his mother would call him 'stupid' and his stepfather would provoke him in many different ways, to the extent that Nezile would 'want to stab him'. Now, he says, things are a bit better, but he doesn't expect that to last too long: '... it's a big difference, because I cook, most of the time, I'm home, I help much. So we ... now we're fine, but I know something is gonna come up again'.

At the very start of the interview, when I ask him to tell me a little bit more about himself, Nezile describes himself in a relatively unconstructive way, claiming that 'well, there's nothing much about me, I'm just me...' Immediately after that, he refers to the place of violence, crime, drugs and weapons in his life. He mentions his admiration at a young age for a man he calls his brother, who would do 'bad things' his whole life, and describes how he, at the age of thirteen started smoking drugs and stealing money. At the age of fourteen, he was 'introduced to weapons', and kept on wanting more and better. He used to have his 'own gang', the main aim of which was 'to get known', to be feared. Nezile says he has been trying to quit gang life as someone got shot because of him, and he fears getting shot himself now.

Nezile's stories around educational decision-making, and his experience of school, are an amalgam of placing the agency on this level with others. There was his mother, who would sometimes call him 'dumb' and thereby take away his motivation. This is not an unimportant point to note: it should also always be kept in mind, that the respondents in this study are all young people who are making the transition from childhood to adulthood. It is generally acknowledged in studies around adolescence that youth need to have information and feedback on their own abilities and with regards to their interests, in order to be able to make choices and decisions on their current and future lives (Motepe 2006). In Nezile's story, it is not evident that he has had that feedback and motivation. Although his mother was there to try and motivate him for his schooling, she was also said to use demotivating language when calling him 'stupid'. Nezile also describes his stepfather as a person who would regularly call him 'stupid':

‘And then, if someone always calls you stupid, why would you still make an effort?’

Yet, despite these remarks, Nezile does describe how his mother would also try to find school after school to get him enrolled into. In her quest for a school that Nezile would feel comfortable and motivated in, his mother eventually found a number of boarding schools as far as Johannesburg and Pretoria for him, so that he ‘would be away from trouble’ and he would be obliged to go to school. He admits then, that the agency around schooling was also with himself, and that he would decide not to put an effort into learning or doing homework.

Finally, there was also agency on the side of the schools that would ‘kick him out’ every time he would ‘do something bad’. Contrary to the young adults mentioned above, nowhere in the course of the talk does he describe his experiences of school in positive terms: to him, school was mostly a boring place, with often absent teachers, or ‘an irritating teacher, and a very slow teacher, or a teacher that is always upset’, too much theoretical teaching and too little practical work; a place also where he could never succeed: he would not be able to focus, or to understand questions, he failed his tests and says he only ever really passed till grade 4. However, even when he was given a more responsible position as a prefect, and he decided ‘to try’, he eventually gave up focusing and working.

At the time of the interview, Nezile had dropped out of school. He was working as a waiter, which, as he said, he felt ‘fine’ about as he was ‘working immediately, in different places, I’m not just sitting around and doing nothing at home’. However, one of my other respondents who knew Nezile, later told me that he had quit the job.

1. Dreaming of success, but without a long term plan

Like the other young people, Nezile too describes his dreams in materialistic terms, pointing also at a desired high-level professional occupation:

‘In 10 years time, I’m gonna have my own plots, like sitting in my building with my name written on it and me sitting in my office, but on the first floor...Like being able to take out R 100 like it’s nothing, I want to be that person, but if I can’t be that person, I ... see, I have two careers, right now I’m, on weekends, I’m a DJ and a poet. You see, if I don’t get that, I know that between these two, I’ll make one of them.

However, when I ask him what lies in between today and getting to that point of his life where he will have his office, whether there is a plan, he falls silent: ‘actually, *no, there is no plan*’, and then expresses really high doubts about his future:

‘You can’t know what tomorrow is gonna bring, so I prepare myself for everything, ... *I just wish I can make it to 2010* maybe because I know one of these days something is gonna happen...’

These feelings of isolation, alienation, and despair are not uncommon findings in studies on adolescents growing up in environments characterized by violence and in cases of gang affiliation. In a study on ‘school violence and adolescent mental health in South Africa’, Bility (1999) noted that, indeed, anxiety, conduct problems, depressed moods, emotional and social withdrawal ... are common mental health problems’ among youth affiliated with gangs, yet also among young people who are themselves not involved in gang activities, but for whom gang violence is a daily reality. The author further explains the origin of such feelings:

‘Gang membership involves meanings of being and self-concept, which shape and constrain actions. Behaviors and actions are conducted on the basis of meanings assigned by the group. Often, violence is a centerpiece of the actions the groups define as ‘legitimate’, but are often perceived by the larger community as unacceptable behaviors. ... *the social norms that support the connection of children and adolescents to their communities are eroded and social alienation of young people becomes common, with serious mental health consequences*’ (Bility 1999: 286-287).

2. Doubting, but not rejecting the value of education

Nezile constructs his perception of the value of education in very dubious terms. At first sight, it seems as if Nezile attaches no value to education, in expressions such as:

‘... there is nothing I want at school, you see? ... Like I said, it, for me, school is not important at all.’

However, when talking a bit more about school and ambitions, it becomes clear that there is no complete rejection of an educational ideology. Nezile does relate to the fact that education would perhaps enable him to ‘become someone’, but seems unclear about the time frame within which education could help him reach his dreams. He expresses his doubts around education as follows:

‘I feel bad (about dropping out of school) ‘cause somebody on TV, you see ... you see like, you see people on the TV, and I saw this advert yesterday, this guy who has a brief case and a suit and he was driving. So I’m like, if I finished my standards and everything, would I have been that person immediately or would I have to struggle to be that person? You see? ... so I thought maybe next year I will try again, try to be that person on TV.’

At another instance, he mentions how sad he was every time a school expelled him, but ‘at the same time this person does not like school’, pointing at doubt around his decisions and choices.

Yet, the uncertainty about whether or not education could perhaps be beneficial, and his earlier mentioned understanding that his mother’s life would have been better had she been to school, does not translate into his decisions or into positive actions to work his way to school. Nezile is not sure whether the investment of his time in education is worth the effort, and in Nezile’s case, this insecurity seems part of a larger doubt about his ability to perform well at school (One of the reasons for which he says he has given up school, is the fact that: *‘I have failed almost my whole life. Now how can I just pass right now?’*), but also a more existential uncertainty caused by his environment and the choices he has previously made in his life. The mixture of realizing that perhaps these past choices were the ones that have taken away his possibilities of a better future, and of no longer knowing how to escape his current life, seem to have lead to a perpetual cycle of insecurity, with no room for concrete plans. His orientation is and seems to have been, a short-term oriented one.

In this context, it is perhaps worth exploring why a young man such as Nezile would choose the path of crime in the first place.

3. Choosing crime: instant power and gratification?

Where some choose to endure the long path of education, applying for a job and working one's way up a possible career ladder, some seek short-term oriented ways of getting out of their impoverished situation:

‘Some, they think, they would also just want to rob someone, and have some things of their own, nice things, money ...’ (Field notes on Andile).

This temptation of committing crime as a way out of scarcity, ‘for the sake of survival’ has been noted in research around gang-related activities (Kinnes, 2000:4; Samara 2005; see also Henderson’s 1999). Bility (1999) further asserts that it is ‘apparently, the glamour, money and alternative route to mainstream social achievement and activities offered by gangs (that) make the delinquent subculture very attractive’ (ibid: 291).

Indeed, for others, choosing crime seems to be about more than just gaining ‘things’ that would allow them to express their desired position in society (see also Irin 2007). Immediately at the beginning of his life narrative, Nezile describes how he was introduced to knives at an early age and wanted to get to know other weapons as soon as possible, how he was introduced to drugs and got addicted, how he continuously chooses ‘to do the wrong thing’ like robbing people ‘and stuff’, and how he eventually chose to have his own gang. The main aim of his gang, it seems, was to gain a position of power, ‘to be someone’ who was known and feared in the area:

‘The thing is that we wanted to get known... like when we enter in a place where they (another gang) are known, everyone would just fear, they are scared. We wanted it to be like that with my gang. ... We wanted to be the most feared, like ... It’s saying we want to rule every gang there is, be the only gang that is feared even if the other gang comes...’

Even when now, while Nezile is trying to leave his gang life behind, and while he is aware of the wrongfulness of crime, he still enjoys and exerts his position of power among younger friends who he could even introduce to crime:

‘... They gonna do it and I’m not gonna stop them. I like it when they do it also ... like, let’s say right, mmh ... let’s say you are walking down the street, I come and rob you. My friends are still here: they don’t know

about robbing, they don't know that stuff. I rob you. I'm gonna tell them to do it and force them to do it, seeing at the same time that it is wrong, but I want them to do it.' (Nezile, 19)

Nezile's story resonates findings of Bility's conclusion on the reasons for which young adults may join a gang: 'Adolescents say they join gangs for many reasons: it provides protection, security, recognition, social prestige, friendship, and a sense of belonging and power in a deprived and powerless community' (ibid: 292).

Interestingly, however, when explaining his attraction to crime, Nezile also sometimes mentions another reason, one that places the agency for some of his acts outside himself, and within the cultural belief of witchcraft:

'Mmh ... I could see that, I see that it is wrong and then you know that ... uhm, as *in African culture, we say that okay, when you start these things, you are bewitched and all that...*'

This study was not intended to gain a deeper insight into cultural beliefs such as witchcraft, and at this point of data collection, no further probes on the topic were made. It is, however, important to situate Nezile's reference in what Ashforth has called 'discourses of witchcraft' or a 'witchcraft paradigm' that is present in African culture: 'Discourses of witchcraft can ... be represented as modes of posing and answering questions about evil; about the beings, powers, forces, and modes of action responsible for causing suffering in the world; about the nature and meaning of their effects' (Ashforth 2002: 127; Ashforth 1998). The witchcraft paradigm, according to Ashforth, exists primarily in places of 'spiritual', physical and financial insecurity and answers question in relation to suffering: 'Why me? Why now?' In a situation of deprivation and future insecurity, it seems reasonable to assume that both Nezile and his mother posed themselves exactly those questions, and considered witchcraft a possible answer. However, further research will have to shed more light on the interrelatedness of the witchcraft paradigm with young people's attitudes towards life, and choices around identity.

4. Peer pressure: exerting, resisting and undergoing, all at once

Nezile's stories speak of the impact of peer pressure on young people's lives. He tells about being introduced to weapons and drugs by one type of friend 'my friends from the street', and losing out on others:

‘Because with my friends at school, they saw what I have become and didn’t want to be my friends.’

In his attempt to get away from some of the negative influences of others, he says he now chooses his friends among those who are younger than himself:

‘Like, I have friends now, seeing that I work now, I have my friends, and I’m the oldest ... ‘cause *I told myself that I don’t wanna go with the friends that are my age or older than me, you see. ‘Cause they are gonna make me do bad things again’.*

This element of Nezile’s identity, and of others who choose the path of crime is, as I mentioned earlier, not necessarily combined with a complete rejection of the schooling ideology. There are plenty of instances mentioned by respondents and in the press, about young adults who are members of a gang, but who are also in school. There are stories about pupils who seem to belong to a gang ‘after school hours’: those who will for example defend their school friends against members of their gang when the latter try to attack the school; there is mention of ‘Mashonisas’ operating in schools – young men who lend money and then charge high ‘interest rates’ back, using violence and gang threats when one of their ‘clients’ is unable to repay the money, but who at the same time are pupils in a school, focusing on their school work. These are young people who seem to choose to combine short term strategies that allow them to live ‘a fancy life’ today, with the benefits that education could offer them in future.

The emphasis on the possibility of resorting to crime as a short term strategy, indeed, comes up mostly in interviews with young men, as the description of ‘others’ by the first group of participants already suggested. That is not to say that young women would not react in more short-term oriented ways; some would, like Nezile express high levels of uncertainty and anxiety. None, however, would completely reject the positive ideology around education.

b. Wanting to Live the Fast Life? – The Girls

‘The girls, they are just not interested in anything, they just want to sit at home, hang out on the streets, get drunk and do drugs, they want to live for the now, just having fun, do not think about the future’ (Lindelwa’s description of those who follow ‘the trend’).

Many of the in-school-girls described their peers in terms of this ‘trend’, of hanging out on the streets, or just sitting at home, and some, eventually getting

pregnant ‘because they have nothing else to do’. I was skeptical about this definition, until I met Noxolo:

‘I was shocked by the disinterest of this beautiful young girl in front of me, who defined her whole life in terms of boredom. ... She told me there is nothing for young people to do in the townships, and how she would like to do sports, like basketball. After our talk, I made some time for an internet search, and made sure she gets information about the basketball classes just around her corner. Later, when I asked her aunt how Noxolo was doing, she told me the girl never took any initiative to go and find the classes’ (excerpt from fieldnotes on Noxolo, 14, dropped out).

Yet, when looking deeper into Noxolo’s narrative, it becomes clear that many factors are at play in what seems to have become inertia and disinterest.

Noxolo

Noxolo is a fourteen year-old girl who was in grade 9, but decided to drop out of school three weeks before the interview. She moves between houses in different parts of Khayelitsha, depending on her mood: ‘like when I get bored in Mfuleni, I go to Khayelitsha, and when I get bored in Khayelitsha, I go to Mfuleni’. She will either stay at the house where her mother lives, which she would then share with her grandmother and her brother, or her aunts’ and uncles’ house she would share with 10 other people.

Noxolo strikes me as a very listless young girl, who portrays her life and days in Khayelitsha in various degrees of boredom: ‘there is nothing to do there in Khayelitsha ... it feels the same as being dead’. Yet at the same time, she describes herself as an outgoing and adventurous person, and tells me she likes to go out a lot, spend time with friends, walking around, window shopping at the malls, but that most of the time her ‘days are boring, most with the family, not the friends’. The quality of the relationships between her and the other family members is not very clear, but Noxolo does tell me that she does not get along with her mother whom she says shouts at her a lot and embarrasses her in front of other people. When she decided to drop out of school, there was no possibility to talk to her mother about it, but she tried to talk to her aunt.

As in the case of Nezile, she motivates that decision to drop out of school in first instance by the fact that she felt she was going to fail anyway. Noxolo was at a multiracial school and was taught in both Afrikaans and English, not in her mother tongue, Xhosa. Noxolo tells me she was fine with English, but Afrikaans was a real problem, especially when it came to subjects like Maths. She did not

understand, and felt that there was no one she could ask for help, because even the extra classes that were meant to help those with problems were taught in Afrikaans. Noxolo says that, as her teacher kept on telling her she would fail, she thought there was no reason to keep going 'as you think you will fail anyway'. She asserts that there was no one in school or outside of school that she could ask for help.

Apart from the language problem and not understanding mathematics, Noxolo further does not describe her experience of school in very positive terms either. She says she was 'bored' at school, there was 'nothing' she liked. She looked for external motivators to keep going to school, but in the morning, when she had to get up and start making her way to school, there would be no one around: not her friends, nor her mother who would wake her up, but by the time Noxolo should leave, would already have gone to work. Finally, Noxolo describes her former school as 'a crazy place' that struggles with a lot of gangsterism and drug dealing, problems that she assigns mainly to the Coloured community's way of life: 'the Coloured people, they are gangsters and like robbing people and killing people, it's like that'.

I did, at this point in the research, not yet visit the schools the respondents were talking about and so had no way of really estimating how much of Noxolo's narrative around her school experience was based on reality and how much was her perception of the context. Importantly, however, *the perception* of the school environment has indeed also been considered of significant influence on young adults' feelings and decisions around schooling (Roeser and Eccless 1998: 125). Furthermore, the fear for failure, the importance of 'perceptions of positive teacher regard', and the overall perceptions of the schooling environment as factors of influence on young adults' performance in and decisions around education have been recognised in earlier mentioned studies on educational outcomes. Roeser and Eccless (1998), in their study on 'Adolescent's Perceptions of Middle School' and the 'Relation to longitudinal changes in academic psychological adjustment', for example, found that 'perceptions of an emphasis on competition and differential treatment by ability in middle school were related to diminished academic values, feelings of self-esteem, and academic achievement, and increases in school truancy, anger and depressive symptoms over time' (ibid: 123-124).

Despite her dropping out, Noxolo does not reject a general positive ideology of education. In fact, before she started going to school in the townships, she applied to get into schools in Town, Sea Point, Mowbray or Wynberg Girls' School, because 'those are the better schools like in Cape Town, but others ... they are just all the same'. She was not accepted at those schools, however, and

therefore decided to go to a multiracial school, as she still considered that a better school.

Nevertheless, Noxolo tells me she is hoping to get into a new, good school, perhaps even a boarding school, so that she would be obliged to go to school and work.

At the beginning of 2007, I was told Noxolo had indeed applied for other schools, yet in the townships again. It was unclear at the time of writing the paper whether she had indeed started a new year in school.

Thobeka

Thobeka is an eighteen year old girl who was born in Nyanga, Cape Town, where she now lives with her mother, sisters, brother and a cousin. The family lives off what her mother and older sister make from selling things in the tavern and tuck shop that they run at the front of the street; Thobeka herself had, at the time of the interview, just accepted a part time ‘runner’ job to earn some money ‘for the season’⁸.

Thobeka describes herself as a ‘fun person’ who likes to be out with friends, going to the beach or shopping. She enjoys life in her family’s house, where she says they are all very close: they share a lot of happy and some sad memories, and are always there for each other. She describes her relationship with her mother as a rather authoritative one, stating that her mother is a very strict woman who will put down curfews for them, and with whom she finds it impossible to talk about boyfriends or sexual relationships, because she is ‘scared of her’. Yet her mother is one of the most important people in Thobeka’s life, one who will always support her. When she needs to talk about more sensitive topics, she would rather turn to her cousin, with whom she says she does ‘everything’ together, or her aunt, who would also buy her ‘stuff and give money’.

At the time of the interview, Thobeka was doing grade 11 at Vuyiseka High School in Philippi, a school she describes as ‘boring’, mainly because, as she says, the teachers are often absent: ‘like last year, my maths teacher, I would not see him for two weeks. I don’t know where he goes; I don’t know ... we would just sit around and do nothing. The teachers, they don’t work well with us.’ It is further boring because they don’t ‘do anything’, and there are no facilities in the school: ‘we don’t have outings like going to movies or going to the camp’.

⁸ The interview took place just before the Christmas break. A runner is someone who helps waiters in a restaurant to clear tables.

Thobeka says it is that boredom, the just ‘sitting around’ that often makes her decide in the morning that she will not be going to school that day: she often stays home from school for days on end, and, on days that she does go, will decide at lunch time that she can just as well go home because there is no one to teach.

Regarding homework, Thobeka tells me she hardly ever does any, and that too, she blames on the teachers who never work with the textbooks: ‘if one teacher comes in and say ok let’s turn to page ‘what what’ and read. When she goes out, we’ll close the book’. She says educators also don’t make the pupils do homework, let alone check whether they have done it the next day. The one time she really took her textbooks to read, is at the end of the year to prepare for exams, knowing that she might have to answer questions on things she had never heard during the year.

These negative experiences with schooling on the one hand, and Thobeka’s perceived value of education on the other, contain a number of contradictions, in that she tells me that she believes ‘education is important’, and that she in fact likes school: ‘I like learning something new every day’. Thobeka believes that the subjects she is being taught are interesting and relevant for her future life. She wants to become an airhostess and says that ‘what I like to become is related to the subjects that I’m doing now and I ... I like all the subjects’. To illustrate to me just how serious her dream about becoming an airhostess is to her, Thobeka starts looking around in cupboards and drawers, trying to find an article she tore out of a magazine a few years ago, which states exactly how much a hostess earns, what qualifications are needed to get there, etc.

What strikes me most, overall, about Thobeka’s story, is that, even though she has highly aimed dreams, she does not seem to realise the causality between her experience with schooling on the one hand, and the near impossibility for her to fulfil her aspirations. When I ask her what she would have to do to be able to become an airhostess, she almost mechanically replies that ‘she must go to school ... like attend school well’, and then later ‘get my diploma [in tourism, marketing or sales management] and pass very well’. But when I ask Thobeka whether there was ever a possibility to change to another school, she tells me it is impossible to change in grade 11. I ask her whether it would have been possible to change before that, and she agrees, but adds that ‘I thought I wouldn’t ... I won’t have friends like my friends which I have now, I would ... everything would be new: new friends, new teachers, new everything, so I just thought I must stay’.

1. The definition of 'success': Escapism?

Both girls again describe their idea of success in materialistic terms. However, their aspirations are further characterised by an extreme longing for a life without boredom, outside the townships, outside South Africa even, or at least with a lot of travelling. Noxolo describes her dreams as follows:

'I don't know ... but what I wish for is to get away from South Africa and live in another country, that's what I would like, just get away. Maybe I can have a better life there.'

As in many other parts of our talk, she motivates her wish to get away from South Africa in terms of an escape from extreme boredom:

'South Africa is like, it's like boring, because I know a lot of places and it's kind of boring. ... Boring, that's all, having not much to do. You feel the same as being dead.'

Thobeka too, like Noxolo, talks of boredom, especially at school. Her dream is more concrete than Noxolo's, and seems more motivated: she dreams of living and working as an air hostess and collects and keeps information on that job. Like P, she phrases the attraction of her dream in terms of discovering other places, seeing the world:

'Like, it travels all around the world, you see, you meet people, you meet celebrities.'

After further discussion with, for example, Noxolo, it becomes more clear that it is perhaps the longing for a place that would give her a sense of self-esteem, the tools to create the life she dreams of, not necessarily outside South Africa, but at least 'in town, at your side, if only things could be like that': she longs for what resembles a 'white life', applied for formerly 'white schools', would like malls like the ones in town, and wishes herself away from a place where everything is the same and boring, where schools are mad places.

This strong emphasis on wanting to escape is very different from the attitude towards today's hardships among the group of 'dreamers': they too described their wish for change and the extent of problems of poverty and violence, but they did not describe their home and community environment in the same negative terminology as Noxolo. Whereas they chose to endure their present situation and focus on the belief that their futures will be better, Noxolo, Thobeka, as well as Nezile focus on the wish for immediate change.

Yet, despite their high dreams, the girls show very little agency in taking initiatives that could get them any closer to achieving their goals. Noxolo decided to drop out of school, and Thobeka only attends school very irregularly. Noxolo, more than Thobeka, seems to be caught in a sense of hopelessness that again strongly resonates with symptoms of depression, leaving her no power to think constructively about possible solutions for her situation.

2. Failing schools?

In the stories of both girls are references to schools failing young adults. More than once, Noxolo describes her school as ‘a crazy place’. She finds no support with her teachers when she does not understand a subject taught in a language that she has not mastered yet. More to the contrary, she is faced with a teacher who repeatedly assures her she will fail at the end of the year. Thobeka describes a school with unmotivated and absent teachers that leave the process of learning up to the students rather than providing them with guidance on it.

These are clearly different stories from the ones told by the group of ‘dreamers’ who found excitement, fun and supportive teachers at school. The influence of a (bad) schooling environment has been mentioned also in the factors that impact on children’s and young adults’ motivation towards school (Children’s Institute 2003).

At one point, while discussing the township schools we had heard about, my field assistant S. remarked that some schools are indeed as the girls had described. She remarked, from her own experience:

‘You know, in those schools, if you wanna do well, you are on your own’.
(Fieldnotes on discussion with S, January 2007)

3. Not rejecting, yet not trusting education?

Having dropped out of school does not make Noxolo feel better. On the contrary, it seems to have raised her feeling of helplessness. She clearly realises that not going to school is not what is going to make the possibility to reach her dreams more tangible; it is also not what she is proud of, or what she would build her identity on. The same holds for L’s truancy: she does not describe feeling good about it, and rather expresses concern about the fact that she might not be learning all the things she will need to further her studies. Both of these

stories stand in strong contrast to those of Willis' 'lads' (1977) and MacLeod's 'Hallway hangers' (1997).

Indeed, Noxolo still wants to go back to school. Her perception of the value of education is the instrumental dimension heard before, and of enabling one to get a job. She may, however, not share the undivided belief that was expressed by others. She does, for example, believe that even with an education, one still has to 'get lucky and find a job', as her aunt has had university level schooling, but is still waiting to find employment.

4. The impact of peer culture?

Stories of peer pressure and name calling are far less strongly present in these girls' stories than in the first group's narratives, yet at the same time, they do not identify with what Noxolo calls 'a fashion' of drugs and gangsterism in their neighbourhoods either. Both girls, rather, seem to choose partying and socialising to degrees that any adolescent would probably be drawn to: they do not deny drinking, yet claim not to 'overdo it'.

Striking still, is the difference between these two girls' stories and that of Nandipha below, who says she became truant under the pressure of friends and the wish to belong, yet also mentions being an 'outsider to the trend', not wearing the right clothes, not going to the right clubs. Nandipha does not express the same extreme wishes to 'get out' of the township environment as did Noxolo and to a lesser extent Thobeka. Her drop out seemed more related to – apart from the rationalized aspect of school fees – her not realizing the consequences of truancy, and also perhaps the inability to cope with name calling at school when she became older than the other children in her class and her marks started to go down.

NANDIPHA

Nandipha is a very quiet, 20 year old woman who lives in Gugulethu with her mother, two brothers and two sisters. She tells me that, except for her mother who gets a small income for the work she does at a local crèche, nobody in the house is earning a living. Nandipha's father lives in Grassy Park, but there is no contact between the rest of the family and him. At one point during the interview, Nandipha tells me her mother is the one of the most important people in her life, because she has always kept strong, even though she was very sad when Nandipha's father left them, and he was no longer around to take care of them.

Nandipha also says that she doesn't really get along with the others in the household, as they 'do crazy stuff.. like smoke cannabis and they are drinking'. Nandipha describes herself as an outgoing person who likes to read and watch movies. She occasionally passes by the South African Mobile Library Association⁹, but otherwise spends her free time at home, watching TV, cleaning the house or chatting with friends. She says she stays away from drugs and, although she does drink sometimes and go out with friends, she claims to control that and never overdo the drinking.

She dropped out of school in 2005, when she was in grade 10. At first, she tells me she dropped out of school because she was no longer able to pay for the school fees. The school charged 500R per year for fees, and she tells me the principal and others at the school were not willing to help her:

'I told them nobody is working and they said no I must try to pay it off... so I could not go back'.

However, at a later stage in our talk, when talking about her experience at school - she went to Manenberg High School - Nandipha tells me that 'it was nice at first, then I did the wrong things'. She started 'bunking' school when she was in grade 9:

'My friends say no man let's not go to school, let's bunk classes and go to Nyanga Junction (a shopping mall in the area). ... We would go late to school... and we did not go in when they called us to come in for detention... we started smoking...'

When I ask her why she started doing that, she tells me:

'I wanted to follow my friends, to be cool and all that stuff. ... felt like I was cool and doing something out of the ordinary, just like that, and I had friends - I did not have friends at school, I always sat alone - so now I had friends'.

Nandipha passed grade 9 that year, but then in grade 10:

'I did not go to school, could not do my home work... the other kids started making fun of me and I stayed at home, all that stuff'.

⁹ The South African Mobile Library Association (SAMLA) is a non-governmental organisation operating in Gugulethu that offers children and young people of the community a broader access to books. It aims also to stimulate debate around issues facing young adults in the community today. One of the activities organised during the period of fieldwork, for example, was a discussion group around the impact of HIV and AIDS on young people's lives.

She would eventually, after this whole story, come back to her original statement that she dropped out because of not being able to pay school fees.

When I ask her how she feels about it all now, she says she is feeling 'lousy', also because there is no money at home:

'I feel helpless, I want to help her with the money... I have been looking for a job since January'.

Nandipha tells me she would take 'anything' that she could possibly find, whether it is 'a cleaning job, or in a factory'. Apart from that, she is thinking of going back to night school to finish her matric, but also at night school she would have to pay school fees that she now cannot afford.

Nandipha's story is one of choosing to be part of a more collective identity, to have friends and be cool, and thereby losing sight of her own individual aims. It mirrors findings of studies on adolescence that show the enormous influence of the peer group on young people's lives, and the importance of being accepted by such a group. It also illustrates findings of such studies that the transition from childhood to young adulthood is 'characterised by exploration and experimentation, *processes that may have lifelong consequences*' (Motepe 2005: 189, emphasis added), proof of which was also noticeable in Nezile's story.

Ironically, however, even though some of the elements in Nandipha's story remind one of earlier descriptions of 'the trend', she mentions not feeling like she fits into any such trend. She may have friends, but they are not the friends who spend a lot of money on branded clothes, who live a fancy lifestyle, or who just sit around and use drugs. She mentions being finger pointed sometimes for wearing only the clothes she can afford, for not doing drugs, etc. : 'people would say this one is boring', and 'like some of the girls in my street wear tracksuits, brands, and names, so they don't mix with girls like me who don't wear brands and that stuff'.

Nandipha's interview was part of the talk with Siya and one of the SAMLA facilitators, and all of them at this point in the interview mentioned that people would be called 'Demakaar':

A: 'that means 'messed up' hey?'

Siya: 'Yes, you are way back, you are old fashioned, you are not in the know'.

Nandipha mentions sometimes, they would also use the term 'Cheap Line'.

Thus, even when sacrificing the investment in her own future for the short term satisfaction of belonging to a group, she stills describes herself as an ‘outsider’ to the dominant peer culture. Economic constraints that prevent her from wearing fancy clothes, and her choice not to get involved with drugs, still leave her subject to name calling. This is where Dolby’s reference to ‘taste’ resonates again. (Racially defined) groups of students would use expressions of ‘taste’ to set the boundaries to their own group, to define not only belonging, but also exclusion (Dolby 2001).

Today, Nandipha definitely does not reject a positive belief in education, nor does she describe finding her pride in negative choices around schooling. She is looking for ways to complete her matric and find employment, yet in the absence of guidance, she too says she feels ‘helpless’.

Conclusion: The Rationale Behind Educational Decision-Making?

This paper has provided the results of a first round of analysis of young adults’ narratives around educational decision-making. Differing from Willis’ (1977) and MacLeod’s (1987) observations, I did at no point observe a rejection of the dominant positive ideology around education. Rather, I observed a very thin line between maintaining one’s choice to believe in education and acting upon that belief on the one hand, and losing oneself in the doubt and the ‘rudderlessness’ created by a context of ‘fragility’ where very few examples are immediately present to prove the promised benefits of education, on the other. In his work on Black youth in Great Britain, Willis (1990) states:

‘But young black people can never look wholly to the prior generation for clues about how to develop their own identities. The experience of the two generations differ, and some cultural commonalities with white youth must arise from their shared conditions of life – common experiences in the same streets and schools mediated by many of the same cultural media’ (Willis, 1990, in Dolby 2001: 8).

It is clear that many of the young adults struggle with finding the balance between what the older generation expects of them, expectations that also reflect in their own dreams and aspirations, but for which no context of concrete examples exist. These young people do not grow up in the same streets as the ones walked by White South Africans, but in the problem-abundant streets of the Cape townships. They are often enrolled in still under-resourced schools,

and are left to a process of trial and error to investigate which path will lead them to the fulfilment of their dreams.

In this context, some still present very strong personalities and make very conscious choices about education, placing themselves almost outside of the communities they live in. These are young people who choose to focus on their desired future success while enduring the hardships of their lives today. They take pride in creating a long term-oriented plan to fulfil their dreams, rather than opting for quick routes to material gain and respect. Choosing in favour of education is an intrinsic part of this strategy, as are the decisions to maintain mainly, or in some cases only, supportive friendships, and seeking support in traditional institutions such as their homes and families, the church, or school itself.

Others, however, look to short-term strategies that allow them to distinguish themselves from their fragile and impoverished environment today. Although they too dream of success in terms of some high position in the corporate or media world, there is no matching plan to reach these ambitions; dreams are not acted upon through long-term strategies. These are young people who ‘want to live the fast life’. Many thereby seem to lose track of the value of education, although never explicitly rejecting a schooling ideology. Some might thereby turn to crime and others to drinking and drugs to ‘take away the stress’ of being pulled between poverty and the wish to ‘live a fancy life’. Others seem to combine both the short-term strategy and the long-term investment of their time in schooling.

Henderson (1990) pointed at the absence of an endpoint in the young adults’ lives, resulting in attempts for resolution. It is exactly because of that ‘endlessness’ that these strategies cannot be regarded static or unambivalent. Many mixed and ‘in-between’ versions can be noted, one of which may be an almost complete inertia. Indeed, some of the young people share the wish for a ‘better life’, but no longer know exactly how to reach that aim, almost literally ‘getting stuck’ in inertia and hopelessness. Many also express doubts when choosing one way or another.

Furthermore, these strategies are strongly mediated by the young people’s social worlds. It is here that Henderson’s (1999) idea of fragility comes in, a compound of factors that can lead to a reorientation towards other long, or short-term choices. I consider ‘fragility’ as a slightly broader concept and perceive it as the compound of ‘fluid’ social relationships, economic pressures and inequalities, crime and violence, the temptations and influences of, and frustrations caused by a globalised, materialistically oriented society that offers

young people today a myriad of choices, yet in the absence of strong guidance and evidence on the outcomes of such choices.

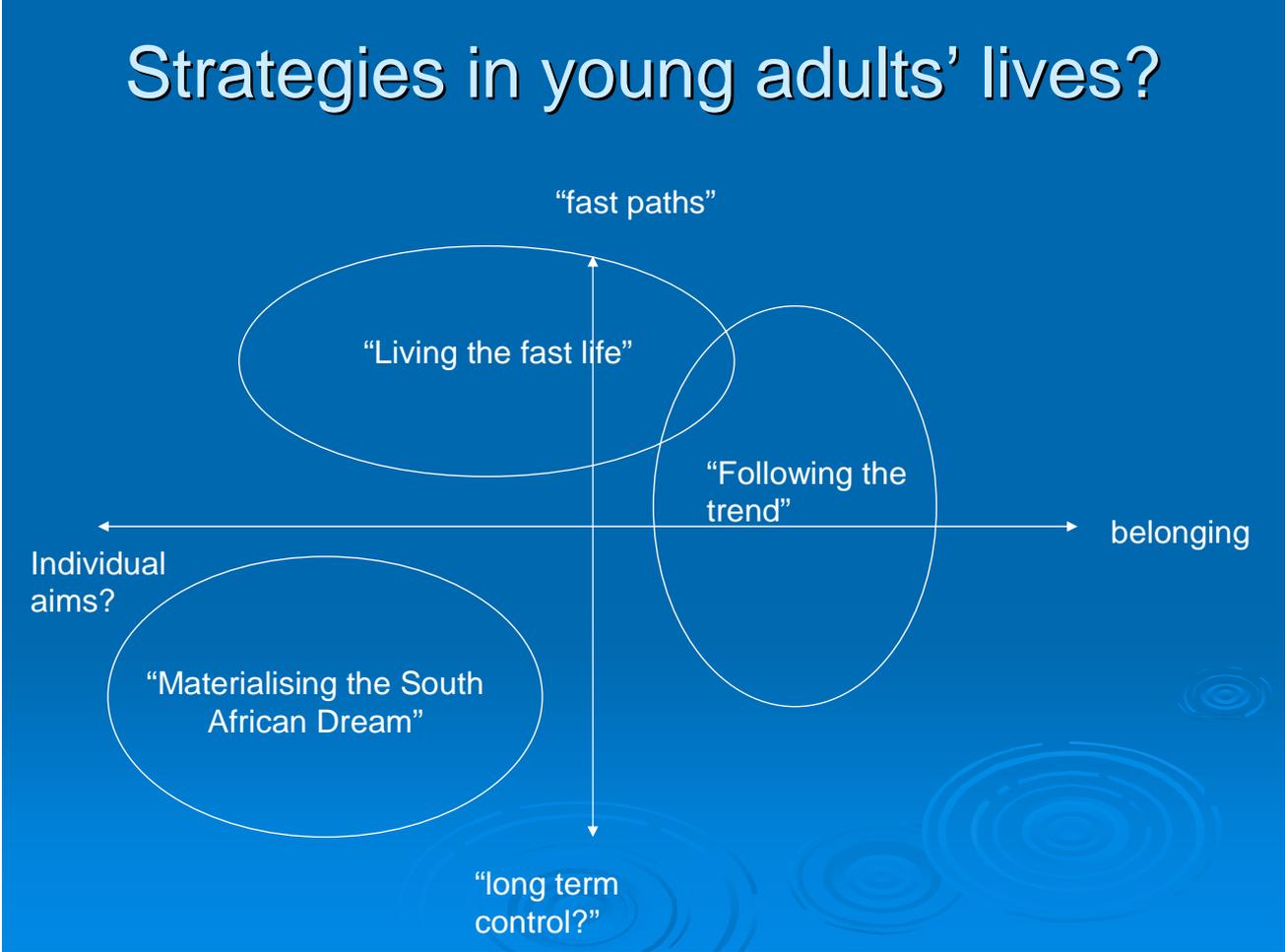


Figure one: tentative development of a framework for strategies.

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