The stuff that dreams are made of: narratives on educational decision-making among young adults in Cape Town

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Abstract

This article examines themes of educational decision-making in the narratives of high-school aged youth in the African townships around Cape Town. From a longitudinal, in-depth study, emerged patterns of decision-making that relate to a larger identity-constructing process. I argue that these youth, growing up in the complexities of post-apartheid South Africa, construct positive images of 'future selves' that entail an aspiration for long and successful lives. Such ambitions are shaped in stark contrast to the concrete experiences of life in deprivation of their less educated parents. Youth choose life-paths or strategies to achieve their envisaged future, different from their peers who are said not to be interested in school. Strategies are, however, not static: shifting contextual factors may lead them to rethink their choices and plans; they move between different strategies, or create in-between versions that leave room for adaptation. [educational decision-making; youth; identity; African; future selves; life paths; deprivaton]

Introduction

The context of this article is a broader research project that looked into young adults' educational decision-making (EDM) in an era of AIDS, incorporating both quantitative and qualitative methodologies (De Lannoy, 2008). The larger study aimed at understanding the validity of hypotheses – derived from rational choice perspectives – that suggest that HIV and AIDS affectedness would lead South African youth and their caregivers to devalue education as a resource for upward social mobility (Barnett and Whiteside, 2002). This

article reports on a subsection of the study and presents the narratives of five African[1] young adults in Cape Town regarding decisions on education.

In South Africa, the study of educational inequalities has been dominated by quantitative studies of the socio-economic correlates of grade attainment, drop-out rates, and so on. Results have indicated the impact of household structure, such as number of siblings and gender of the household head, on educational outcomes (Anderson and Lam, 2003; Case and Ardington, 2006). Equally, level of education within the household has been found to have a significant impact on schooling results (Anderson, 2000 and 2005; Lam, 1999), as have school and neighbourhood characteristics (Van der Berg and Louw, 2006; Lam, 1999). However, work in these traditions does not help to understand the ways in which young people interact with their socio-economic and educational context, and how they take up agency within it.

International, mainly ethnographic, research has indicated the importance of understanding youth as agents within the educational context and with respect to their educational choices. Studies have focused on the construction of ‘cultures’ or ‘identities’ of resistance that lead to the reproduction of social (class, racial and gender) inequalities: Willis (1977) and MacLeod (1987, 1995) presented cases of working class young men who exerted agency by *actively* choosing to disengage from education and to reject the official, educational achievement ideology. Ogbu (1985) indicated the existence of an ‘oppositional identity’ among African youth, construed in opposition to a dominant White society that offers no possibility for upward mobility to those who are not White. On the other hand, there is a corpus of work that looks at ‘academic resilience’ rather than ‘resistance’. Such resilience has been defined as the ability to receive higher educational outcomes and maintain motivation, despite a context of adversity that puts youth at risk of lower educational achievement (for example, Waxman and Huang., 2003).

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[1] The study focused on educational decision-making among African youth, as these are the ones most heavily affected by the pandemic, but also those who have consistently lower educational outcomes in the country. I am mindful of the sensitivity and controversy around the use of racial terms in South Africa, as such categorisations are social constructs maintained under the previous Apartheid regime. Nevertheless, I believe it is essential to recognise these historical constructs in this article, as they continue to carry important social meanings, and explain many of the remaining inequalities in the country. I use ‘African’ to refer to indigenous South Africans – the African youth in my sample all spoke Xhosa. ‘White’ refers to South Africans of European ancestry who received prioritised treatment under apartheid.

No South African research has examined school and identity in a similar manner. Available studies (for example, Dolby, 2001; Soudien, 2007) have been concerned with the way in which youth identity is constructed within the school context, yet not with how this would lead to differential educational outcomes. This study contributes exactly to that arena of understanding. The study assumes young adults' agency in educational choices and adopts a *contextual* perspective: one that regards agency as occurring within and in interrelation with the social, economic, cultural and historical context of youths' lives.

In the following sections, this article will first briefly introduce the sociological and psychological literature that underlies the argument on EDM as relating to young adults' identity. Thereafter, section three deals with the methodology applied for data collection and analysis, followed by a short description of the background within which South African youth make decisions around schooling. Sections five and six constitute the body of the paper, introducing the importance of 'dreams': positive images for youths' 'future selves' that shape and influence their decisions around – among others – education. The penultimate, sixth section illustrates, however, how strategies to reach ones aspired future, chosen at one point in time, cannot be considered static. Two case studies, of Siya and Kuthala, are used to show how plans focusing on a longer term future do not necessarily constitute end points in these young adults' complex worlds. Shifting factors in a context characterised by changing family structures, peer pressures, often malfunctioning schools, increasing levels of violence, illness and death in the communities, and so on, may lead young adults to rethink their choices and plans.

A word on terminology:

1. Identity, lifestyles and fateful moments

The conceptual framework for analysing the qualitative material for this study bridges sociological and psychological perspectives on youth identity and school engagement. Unlike Willis (1977), I do not restrict my analysis to a class-based approach. Rather, I borrow from Sadowski (2003) who refers to youth identity in broader terms, including class, race, gender, minority groups, or sexual orientations: "Much of a student's success or failure in school centers [. . .] on questions of *identity*: 'Who am I?' [. . .] 'Where do I want to go with my life?'." (p.1–2)

For the *process* of identity creation, I draw mainly on Giddens' theory on identity in a post-modern society. Giddens (1991) assumes that individuals, in a post-modern or 'post-traditional' society, have the agency to *construct* their own identity, through a process in which "a complex diversity of choices [are] to be made [with. . .] little help as to which options should be selected" (p.80). Identities are constructed in the absence of rigid boundaries, previously created by tradition and culture. However, not all choices may be open to a given individual: [real or perceived] options are restricted by a person's social, economic and structural context. They are *bounded* by "over-arching social structures shaping and constraining what the individual actor *sees* as a menu of rational choices" (Roberts, 2003). Giddens, however, asserts that even in situations of deprivation, individuals retain the ability to exert agency over their situation, to explore options for different life paths. In such cases, he states: "Lifestyle habits are constructed through the *resistance* of ghetto life [. . .]", recognising, however, that choices under such circumstances may become "a source of despair" (1991, p.86).

Furthermore, in the absence of traditional or cultural guidelines, it is impossible to escape the thought that the chosen lifestyle is but one of the possible options available, creating always a certain level of anxiety, even in individuals with high levels of resilience. Such feelings of anxiety become especially pronounced in what Giddens calls "fateful moments", in which an individual is forced to rethink fundamental aspects of present and future existence (pp.202–203), for example, at times of a death in the family, birth, marriage, or divorce.

2. Expanding the notion of self: possible selves and necessary life plans

According to Oyserman *et al.* (2007), "[p]ossible selves [PSs] are positive and negative images of the self already in a future state. . . [they] personalize goals and connect current behaviours to future states, [They] improve self-regulatory capacity and make one's current situation feel meaningful" (p.479). In US-based studies, the authors found that students who had detailed and specific school-focused PSs *and strategies to attain them* (e.g. go to class, ask the teacher for help), were more likely to do well in school than those who did not.

In their study into adolescent ambitions in the USA, Schneider and Stevenson (1999) apply a similar logic and refer to the importance of ambitions in shaping adolescents' lives and educational outcomes: "[adolescents] can use

their ambitions like a compass to help chart a life course and to provide direction for spending their time and energy" (p.4). Adolescents who have 'aligned ambitions' – whereby educational and occupation goals are complimentary – are more likely to develop a 'life plan', a detailed strategy to fulfill the ambitions. In a post-modern, rapidly changing society, a supportive, knowledgeable structure is needed for the creation of aligned ambitions and detailed life paths.

Both studies argue that lower class families and under-resourced schools are less able to provide adolescents with such knowledge and support a middle class environment.

Methodology

In the year preceding our first contact, all participants had made significant decisions about their education. Kuthala, an 18-year-old girl, had decided to drop out of school in grade 11, after having had a baby. Lindelwa, 19, and Alutha, 18 – both girls – had written and passed their matric exams, but had decided to take a 'gap year', join a study group, and rewrite their exams in order to get better marks, broaden their study options and chances to access bursaries. Noluthando, a 21-year-old woman had decided to continue her tertiary education. Siya, a 22-year-old man, had dropped out in his first year of tertiary education, after his father's sudden death. All lived in resource poor African townships that constitute the majority of low-income, urban settlements around Cape Town, areas invariably characterised by high levels of unemployment, violence, crime, illness and death. All had attended under-resourced primary and high schools.

Lindelwa was first selected through the author's earlier work with the non-governmental organisation Southern African Environmental Program (SAEP).[2] The other respondents were selected through snowballing: the intention was to reach a number of young people from the same socio-economic background, sharing a number of comparable stressors such as peer pressure and school circumstance.

I conducted several informal, as well as semi-structured interviews with all participants, spread out over an extended period of time. All were aimed at

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[2] www. saep.org

gathering a deeper understanding of the youth's life histories, relationships with significant others, experience at and perceptions of school, and the broader communities, insights in and experience with the AIDS-pandemic, and very specifically their choices around schooling. Observational work was conducted when accompanying participants to activities in their areas, ranging from hip hop jam sessions to theatre show cases of local groups, and other outings.[3]

The methodology and ethics for the study were approved by the University of Cape Town. Written, informed consent was obtained from all participants, and all were informed of the fact that they could at any time choose not to answer a question, to 'take a break' from the study, or to stop participating all together, should they at any time feel uncomfortable with the way in which things were going. Invitations to join me to activities in the area were always open (see De Lannoy 2008 p.50, for more details). Analysis of the data was guided by Miles and Huberman's approach (1994), which differs from the original Grounded Theory idea that one should be able to conduct data analysis purely inductively, with theory emerging only out of the text (Babbie and Mouton, 2001). Miles and Huberman (1994) accept the fact that both data collection and analysis may be driven by previously gained and developed (theoretical) knowledge, concepts and questions, an approach that fitted the combined, iterative quantitative and qualitative approach of the broader study.

Educational decision-making in context: a very brief sketch

In post-apartheid South Africa, changes in material provisions might, according to recent community surveys, be rapid in some respects, many youth – especially African – still grow up in impoverished situations, within changing family structures, in communities with often under-resourced

[3] I conducted all interviews. Where language proved a problem, a fieldwork assistant would be present to translate. I am aware that the need for a translator in some of the interviews, and the fact that interviews were not conducted in a language that was the interviewer's or respondent's first language, may have had implications for data collection and interpretation. Being a foreign (Belgian), White woman conducting research in African areas might also have influenced the research. The combination of all these factors may have "enabled some things to happen and perhaps closed down other things" in the course of the project (Parker, 2005, p.30). However, where ever possible or believed necessary, linguistic or cultural interpretation was asked of the research assistant and transcriber.

schools, and heavily affected by unemployment, crime, violence and HIV. General Household Survey data of 2006 indicate that 45% of African households still live in informal dwellings (Statistics South Africa, 2008); youth unemployment remains high, again especially among African youth , with an estimated 60% of those aged fifteen to thirty unemployed (Mlatsheni, 2006); and among young adults aged fifteen to twenty-four, HIV-prevalence is an estimated 10% (UNAIDS, WHO, 2008). In African townships such as Nyanga and Khayelitsha in Cape Town, HIV-prevalence is at an estimated high of 28% among women aged twenty to twenty-four (City of Cape Town, Health Services, 2007).

At the same time, these are young people growing up in a globalised world, and in a country where the dominant discourse is one of potential upward mobility, through interventions like ‘Affirmative Action’ and ‘Black Economic Empowerment’. This amalgamation of factors provides the background to young people’s EDM discussed in following sections.

Positive educational decision-making:[4] finding one’s pride in a focus on the future

Many of the young adults who made positive choices concerning their schooling spoke about the differences between themselves, their lifestyles and those of others around them. Theirs is a choice on identity that is defined in opposition to these ‘others’: peers who are said to be part of a dominant culture of skipping classes or dropping out all together because ‘at school it’s difficult, it’s boring’:

> 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.

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[4] Educational decision-making is here defined broadly. Positive choices entail choosing to engage, remain engaged, or re-engage with schooling; Negative would be decisions to drop out of an educational institution, or not to invest in schooling by skipping classes, not doing homework, or not looking for possibilities to return to school. The terminology of ‘negative’ and ‘positive’ decisions is by no means meant to express a value judgement, but was merely used to help the analysis along and to present the data in a comprehensible way. It should be noted that the classification pertains to decisions as observed at one particular moment in time: some of those who at one point decided to ‘drop out’ may later try to regain access to education in a school they consider ‘better’; such situations are illustrated in greater detail by the case studies of Siya and Kuthala.

This peer culture was described in gendered terms, with young men turning to crime, drugs and alcohol, and girls to partying, smoking and drinking – behaviour that was seen as placing them at a higher risk for being raped, contracting HIV or falling pregnant – or to the lethargically sounding 'just hanging around'.

The young people in my sample that made and maintained positive choices around their education were those that created their identity not – or not only - within this dominant, *current* peer culture. Rather, their focus in life was constructed around an aspired *future*, a 'possible self' (Markus and Nurius, 1987; Oyserman, 2007):

> One day. . . I want to be the person I want to be. (Alutha)

Ambitions, 'a dream', or 'hope' feature strongly in these young adults' narratives, enabling them to maintain a focus on the future, and not be drawn into their peers' culture:

> *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, . . . If you do have *these dreams*, then *that is what keeps you to go on.* (Lindelwa)

Indeed, dreams and hope, in a context of hardship, have 'survival value'. Maintaining ambitions becomes a coping mechanism in the daily experiences of deprivation (Markus and Nurius, 1987).

This importance of hope, dreams and plans in township youths' lives was also noted in earlier work by, for example, Ramphele (2002).

The young adults' dreams, and ideas of future 'success', are often filled with materialistic elements of higher class life. Ironically, in South Africa, those higher class ambitions may resonate with many of the characteristics of the life of White people. They are, however, also part of the growing African elite. Within the townships and through the medium of television, examples are available of those who have made it up the social ladder, and now have big houses, beautiful cars, perhaps a responsible top-level job. These are elements that also convey a new sense of independence, as Lindelwa's description of her dream above illustrates. In another example, 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.

This wish for material success and upward mobility has been described also by other scholars in the country. Soudien remarks: “Partly as a result of affirmative action, some young blacks feel that the new South Africa offers previously undreamed-of opportunities. [. . .] Money is essential to young South African adults as a facilitator of the good life and as the key to demonstrating status” (2003, p.69).

Thus, these young adults are aspiring to a much higher class and lifestyle than that of their parental generation, unlike Willis’ Lads (1977) who aspired to nothing more than their parents’ working class lives. These findings of the qualitative part of the study were corrobated by the analyses of quantitative data (De Lannoy, 2008). Ramphele too noted “. . . many Black youth associate manual labour with the degrading working conditions their parents had to endure. So careers such as plumbing, electrical contracting, and carpentry are seen as low-status options” (2002, p.101).

For these young adults, the value of education lies in their conviction that without schooling, there is no way to fulfill all the aspects of their dream-future. Education has a clear instrumental function:

> 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)
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> . . . 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)

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.

> [. . .] 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. [. . .] if I was not studying right now, I would probably be working maybe at Pick ’n Pay as a cashier [. . .] you won’t stay there long, you have to move from this job to the next. (Noluthando)

The legacy of Apartheid’s divided educational policy means that only few of the young adults (can) build their positive instrumental ideology concerning education on concrete examples of their parents or other elders.[5] Noluthando

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[5] Census 2001 data indicated that less than 20% of all adults in the areas that the respondents live in, have completed grade 12; maximum 40% of all adults have completed grade 7.

was a rare example in the group who could refer to a clear example of the benefits of education: her father is a teacher, her uncle a school principal. The difference between their lives and that of her uneducated mother who now works as a domestic worker, served as a motivator:

> . . . My first example is my father who is [better] educated than my mom. He has a nice house, nice car, and he's got a stable job, he is able to do things for himself, [not like] my mother.

Others looked for examples in the broader community, or went on what they had heard others say:

> Education is the key to success. … You know, […] *in those countries internationally*, they say an average person is 24 years with at least 2 degrees. (Siya)

In all of these cases, 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 show its benefits only in the years to come. This resonates with Zournazi's statement that "the idea of an abiding hope directs us to new progressive thoughts that involves *accepting the world as it is while persevering in working towards a more equitable and sustainable future*" (2002, p.6). It also mirrors Gayles' (2005) finding in a study on academic resilience: "academic achievement [was seen] as *prospectively meaningful,* if not currently transformative*"* (Gayles, 2005, pp.256, 257).

In short: these young adults maintained positive 'possible selves' [PSs]. High educational aspirations reflected their understanding of education as a means to reach those future goals. However, Oyserman *et al*. (2007) pointed at the necessity to have rather concrete strategies in place, alongside these PSs. I identified a number of strategies chosen by the youth to support their aspired future.

Balancing individual and group identity

Youth who maintained a strong focus on education described facing their communities' scorn and 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 [. . .] they would go to say that I am 'madam'. (Lindelwa)

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

Siya described how he was "dubbed Mr. Fezeka High" for doing well in school and for being able to take part in international events 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."

One can question whether this subjection to name-calling may also be interpreted as a disbelief (or skepticism) among community members 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, 1977, pp.128). However, in South Africa, it seems the pervasive discourse of 'freedom' and a better life in 'the new South Africa' does create the general belief in upward mobility. Rather, it seems that name-calling originates among those who (still) have no means to better themselves and are left with not much else but envy of those who have gained a slightly better position. Significant levels of community 'envy', the fact that young people in South Africa are subject to such jealousy, and get caught between individuality and community has, indeed, been mentioned by others. Ramphele described how opting for personal achievement in the very poor socio-economic environments of the townships can be seen as 'selling out', or 'acting white': "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" (Ramphele, 2002, p. 96).

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" (p.254) and thereby not place themselves too much outside their peer group. Some of my participants would find ways to combine their need to belong to a wider peer group, with the wish to remain focused on their personal aims, thereby displaying high levels of self-control:

> [. . .] I think it is all about balancing, having a good time and also knowing what you are doing and where you are going. [. . .] *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 [. . .] At the end of the day, I have to be somewhere, so I don't see any life in that.* (Noluthando)

> 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* [. . .]. (Alutha)

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 (are able to) adapt such strategies: although Siya seemed a very sociable person, active in community work and helping out at the local library NGO, he did not find a way to accommodate both his goal of social integration and that of academic success, and chose to concentrate mostly on his school.

Searching for and receiving guidance and support

Although these respondents showed strong beliefs in their agency when it came to remaining focused on their aims, and making decisions about their friendships, it is clear that some type of guidance may be needed in order to be able to choose, develop and maintain such long-term oriented strategies and decisions. Oyserman *et al.*, (2006, 2007) and Schneider and Stevenson (1999) illustrated the need for parental support and guidance in, for example, developing concrete 'life plans' that could help reach one's goals.

Noluthando narrates her choices about school and the important influence of her family therein: she originally applied for courses on media, but was not accepted by the University of Cape Town (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.

Her father helped set up a meeting with people at the Cape Technikon, a tertiary institution in town. There, Noluthando was eventually allowed to start environmental management. Her family thus provided her with the guidance and motivation necessary to support her in her long-term orientation.

However, not all participants could rely on such support or motivation from their parents or relatives; lower levels of, and experience with, formal education can result in a lack of a 'real' understanding of school and schoolwork among caregivers (see also Bray, Gooskens, Kahn, Moses and Seekings, 2010). Consequently, many of those who were able to maintain their educational focus had looked for and found additional support in NGOs, or with siblings, a boyfriend, or a particular teacher.

Brittle decisions: the stories of Siya and Kuthala

The previous section described South African youth's belief in the instrumentality of schooling for reaching 'a better life'. It described 'life paths' chosen to achieve these aspired, successful 'future selves'. The narratives sounded structured and convinced: there was a plan alongside the dream, so that dreams would not become mere fantasies. Plans were supported by high levels of individual resilience and goal orientation, and often by other forms of guidance and broader support structures. However, such paths, as described at one point in time, do *not* necessarily constitute an end point in the youths' processes of identity formation. By means of two short case studies, this final section will illustrate how young adults would grapple to maintain their ideals and strengths, when going through (a series of) 'fateful moments' (Giddens, 1991).

Siya's story illustrates what can happen when a young, skilled person loses the necessary (financial) support to keep paying for his education. At the time of the first interview, he was twenty-two and living in Guguletu in a household of five. His grandmother's pension was the family's main income, supplemented by Siya's earnings from small jobs. Both Siya's parents had passed away, leaving a profound impact on his life and dreams. His mother got sick and died in 1997; his father, who had been paying for his civil engineering study at the Cape Technikon, was shot in Gugulethu in 2003 "over nothing. . . he died for nothing". After his death, there were no funds for Siya to continue his education.

Siya always placed an enormous emphasis on the importance of education in his life. Now not able to further his schooling, he felt disappointed and depressed:

> 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.

In moments like these, Siya would expect to be able to fall back on broader institutions than just the family: he applied for several funding possibilities, and informed the Cape Technikon of what had happened, but had not found an entrance back into higher education. Frustrated also about not having been able to start at UCT, Siya referred to the absence of guidance and clarity regarding the educational process after having passed matric.

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

Despite the hardships and disappointments, Siya did not give up on his dreams, and was in constant search for gaining further skills. After having dropped out, he found work, thereby funding short-term courses for himself, in line with his original interest in engineering. He maintained a close contact with community organisations and me, always enquiring about new opportunities to further himself. In the beginning of 2008, Siya had managed to secure a part-time position at the Cape Technikon as well as additional funding and was back at school. He said he was struggling to catch up with schoolwork after his very long absence. He struggled also with his home situation: his grandmother had fallen ill and had moved back to the Eastern Cape. Siya was left feeling he now no longer had a real home and that there was not enough money to maintain everyone in the house. He claimed that the remainder of the family he now lived with did not give him support for his education, He was very worried he would not make it through the exams at the end of the year because of all these worries.

Khuthala was 18 at the time of the first interview, mother of a one-year-old baby boy. Growing up with a father who drank and abused her mother, left no money for school fees, uniforms or sometimes even food, she was fetched by her grandfather to live in the Eastern Cape, away from the abuse. When her grandparents died, she moved back to Cape Town. She now lived in Gugulethu, together with her mother, father, brother and baby. Khuthala still

describes the current situation at home in negative terms, wishing she "would have a different father, or maybe I had no father".

She described herself as a kind, observant person, "hungry for knowledge", who loved to go to school. She attached great importance to education, extending to her entire generation: to her, success is also about "making history for South Africa", showing the rest of the world and the older generations in the country that even someone out of what she says they call "the cursed generation", can make it. Her statement illustrates a process of constructing an identity in oppositional terms, *not* against the normative belief in the benefits of education, but against this popularly held belief of "a lost generation".

Despite Khuthala's positive attitude towards education, her unplanned pregnancy made her drop out in 2005, when she was in grade 11. Her narrative again echoes examples of how institutions that are expected to provide guidance and help, fail today's youth: her home is not a place where she can find safety and stability, and medical services in her area let her down severely. Khuthala had known about contraceptives, but when she went 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.

She 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.

Kuthala repeatedly mentioned 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". Yet she maintained a strong belief in the value of education for her further life. During our first talk, she was committed not to give up her dreams:

> My future. . . well, I still have time. [. . .] I can still go to school, I can still pursue my dreams, [. . .] I'm not just gonna give up just because I have a baby [. . .] I'm still going to where I want to be.

She was considering in very concrete terms finding a part-time job, taking the baby to crèche and starting part-time education 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 in a clothing shop. She asked me to let her know of possibilities to combine full-time work with studying. I forwarded information about a school in a neighbouring township that offered classes at a time that allowed people to go to work afterwards. I contacted Khuthala again a few weeks later, only to hear a lot of doubt in her voice: most day classes were full, and night classes happened at a time when lack of reliable transport would make it too dangerous for her to attend. She now also expressed uncertainty about being able to combine all the tasks. Her belief in self-efficacy had clearly taken a serious knock. At the beginning of 2008, I was told things were not good with her and she was still not back in school.

Both stories mirror Ramphele's observation of the fact that "key factors as the family, school and community repeatedly fail" today's youth (Ramphele, 2002, p. 31). In the absence of clarity and support to help them complete their education to levels they feel necessary, both Siya and Khuthala expressed feeling anxious, adrift and depressed. They did not lose track of the importance of schooling, but both resorted to survival strategies that would allow them to at least earn some money and perhaps in the long run allow them to start education again. It is not hard to imagine how many other young people in situations as these would lose focus and resort to other, even more short-term oriented activities.

Conclusion

I argue that young adults' educational decision-making is an integral part of their identity-formation. Youth in my sample constructed positive images of future selves: their ambitions for future lives were consistently high, allowing them to maintain their belief in 'a better future', shaped in contrast to the concrete experience of lives in deprivation of their lower educated parents. They adopted strategies or 'life plans' to support those ambitions. However, neither the ambition for a future self, nor the choice of strategy take shape in isolation. They are created and chosen in the complex context of 'the New South Africa' that presents these previously disadvantaged youth with a widespread belief in upward mobility, but that also confronts them with changing family structures, often inconsistent or 'failing' social relationships, peer pressures, and so on.

These strategies are also not static: 'fateful moments' may lead young adults to (having to) rethink their choices and plans. The absence of support networks and guidance to make their chosen strategies or 'life plans' as detailed and concrete as possible, can easily lead to a breakdown in the process of identity-formation, to helplessness, or even depression. Young people's wish to break out of a situation and reach their goals is still present, but they no longer know exactly 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 which, in turn, may lead to further alienation.

The findings of the study indicate the need to carefully understand young adults' complex worlds and the interaction thereof with their decision-making processes. Hypothesising a potential loss of the value of education in the face of adversity, unfounded by a thorough understanding of youth in their daily living contexts runs the risk of increasing the rumours of a "lost generation" of youth. Instead, I argue in favour of the possibility of offering support to those who, even in the absence of support and clear guidance, do maintain long-term aspirations for a better future. Understanding why exactly young adults *do* remain focused on education, and the kinds of barriers they may need to overcome in doing so, should enable policy makers and NGOs to design the kinds of interventions that can tap into youth agency, and that can help build personal resilience in the kinds of harsh living environments the majority of South African youth find themselves in.

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