

“I WAS TERRIFIED OF BEING LABELLED”: SOCIAL EXPERIENCES OF EX-DROPOUTS RE-ENROLLED IN SECONDARY SCHOOL IN SOUTH AFRICA

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Abstract

Using qualitative methods, involving interviews, the study explored, among a sample of 10 ex-dropouts who re-enrolled in secondary schools in South Africa, whether social labels were used to define their social life and the form these social labels take, as they reintegrate at school. It also explored the reactions of these ex-dropouts to the social labels. Evidence in the literature on the effects of negative social labelling on children and adolescents, prompted the empirical investigation at schools in the Eastern Cape, South Africa. The research found that negative social labelling and teasing were persistent force in the lives of ex-dropout at school. Consistent with social labelling theory proposed by Link and colleagues, these experiences were sources of social stress for ex-dropouts. The dominant form of social labels was negative labels. This suggests that ex-dropouts continue to suffer in one form or another beyond the initial circumstances that pushed them out of school. The paper argues that as a consequence of the above evidence, the larger development potential, which the return of ex-dropout to school might offer, will remain unfulfilled unless there is a transformed school context that supports ex-dropout. Suggestions to build a supportive social environment for ex-dropouts at school have been discussed.

Keywords: Social labelling, Dropout reintegration, Social stress, South Africa

Introduction

School drop out remains a central challenge for education systems globally. In both the developed and developing world, each year, a disproportionate number of students quit school prematurely (Brown, 2010; Rumberger & Lamb, 1998). While a growing number of students drop out of secondary school each year globally, evidence certainly in South Africa (Kraak, 2003; Brown, 2010), suggests that many dropouts do return to complete their

education. In other words, for these students dropping out was temporary. There is a tendency in the drop out literature to mainly investigate drop out causes and to profile dropouts. However, there is little emphasis in research on dropouts who return to school, their behaviours, or the social challenges they experience at school. Furthermore, although dropout delinquency and misbehaviours remain a recurring theme in the school drop out literature (Brown, 2010), none of these studies have addressed whether these deviance are outcomes of particular social labels assigned to ex-dropouts who reenrolled at school.

The primary aim of this paper is to describe social labels used to characterise ex-dropouts who returned to complete their education in secondary school. The paper reviewed the body of literature on social labelling and reported on a study conducted within the South African context. The study sought to ascertain the kind of social interaction that exists between ex-dropouts and their peers and teachers at school. In other words, it was interested in determining the sort of commentaries ex-dropouts may have heard their peers and teachers used at them, and the ways they may have responded to these commentaries and labels.

The focus of the research was narrowed to the issue of ‘ex-dropout social labelling’ because by so doing it is possible to draw out particular implications for practice. By so doing, it is also possible to develop a set of well-grounded propositions to provide direction regarding ex-dropout reintegration at school. This was deemed essential in an African context in which there is an imperative to broaden educational access at secondary school level (Grant & Hallman, 2006). Oral sources in the form of interviews provided the basis for analysis of the social experiences. The paper begins with a brief overview of the concept social experiences, social labelling and dropout. After presentation of the findings, the paper considers how teachers and school leaders may support ex-dropouts, and how school authorities may deal with the broader question of ex-dropout reintegration.

Social experiences

The term ‘experience’ is a contested concept. There is no universally accepted definition, and there is no clearly defined method for operationalizing the concept. Nevertheless, experiences are composed of both psychological and behavioural dispositions, including traits, cognition, feelings, perception, and behaviour which are either articulated or inferred (Jurowski, 2009). Social experience is one form of experience – elicited through social encounter and interactions with others. Social experiences may be created in various ways, including through interactional process such as visiting, learning and engaging in activities in an environment which may be at school or away from school (Oh et al, 2007). Unlike other forms of experiences, social experience may be produced intentionally or

unintentionally. It may be produced directly or vicarious (Bandura, 1999). Nevertheless, each person creates his/her own experience. The social experience which one creates is influenced by such factors as the background, values, attitudes and beliefs which one brings to the situation (Jurowski, 2009).

Models of social experiences have been developed by both Pine and Gilmore (1999) and Schmitt (1999). These scholars argue that there are unique dimensions that make up the array of social experience. Schmitt (1999) conceptualised [social] experiences along the trajectory of our sensory system. These components of experiences are as follows: to sense, feel, think, act, and relate. The components are more or less compatible with Pine and Gilmore's (1999) four realms of experiences: passive, active, absorption and immersion. In Schmitt's (1999) conceptualisation, 'feel' encompasses sensory and affective experiences, whereas 'think' encompasses creative cognitive experiences. The 'act' component reflects incidence of escapism and learning. The final component of Schmitt's model of experience is socially labelled 'relate' which suggests that a person can be engaged to 'relate' socially.

While both models of social experience provide useful avenues for analysis, Schmitt conception is opted for in this study. This model draws attention to the way ex-dropout may form social experiences: i.e., to sense, feel, think, act, and relate. The social treatment of ex-dropouts may include the use of social labels, which may lead to negative or positive experiences. Personal characteristics such as the background of ex-dropouts may have an influence on the experience.

The 'drop out syndrome' and social Labelling

In South Africa, incidence of drop out is relatively high throughout the secondary school cycle. In South Africa, dropouts are individuals whose education has been disrupted, at least temporarily (for one month); or it may have been disrupted permanently (never to return). The source of how the disruption occurs is essential. It determines whether or not the absence from school can be disregarded as a drop out incident. A disruption to schooling is classified as drop out case only when the absence results from personal circumstances such as ill-health. Disruption that results from institutionally imposed sanctions is excluded. It means therefore that cases of student suspension or expulsion are excluded from the drop out category.

In secondary schools, drop out and reenrolment are most common at Grades 8, 9, 10 and 11 (Brown, 2010; Motala et al, 2007). As a result, it is quite common to find classes at different Grade levels with high number of ex-dropouts. In 2011/12, the annual school monitoring report revealed that in populated provinces such as Gauteng, Kwa Zulu Natal,

Eastern Cape, as much as five percent of the student enrolment in Grade 8, 9, 10 and 11 were ex-dropouts (ASMR, 2012).

When ex-dropouts return to school, they often are placed at the same Grade level and the same class they were prior to quitting school. While there is nothing wrong with such approach, the decision to return to school may put ex-dropouts in a position of strain. At school, ex-dropouts are much more likely than other students to spend more time trying to catch up in the school curriculum. Depending on the duration of the time spent out of school, ex-dropouts are much more likely than other students to be older and more mature in class. The maturity level may lead to feelings of being an outlier in class among ex-dropouts, or to peers treating them as such in class (Briffa, 2010). Thus, the reaction towards the ex-dropouts may be pleasant and welcoming, or it may be hostile. Hostile social treatment may manifest in various forms, including stereotyping, prejudice, discrimination, scapegoating, rejection, and isolation (Briffa, 2010). These reactions amounts to social labels and collectively shape the social experiences that an ex-dropout creates at school. Social labels have a great influence on how a person may sense, feel, think, act, and relate (Schmitt, 1999).

Labelling is a social treatment. Two strands of meanings have come to be associated with the way social label is understood. First, social label is seen as a product of ‘a meaning-making process’, in which symbolic meanings are assigned to particular social behaviours or experiences (Hacker, 2008). Social labelling is thus treated as an outcome. Alternatively, social label is viewed not as outcome but as a process involving the construction of “Otherness” (Quicke & Winter, 1994). The natural concern is with what happens during the ascription of the social label. Labels may be used to categorise and isolate ex-dropouts.

The act of social labelling is not in itself a bad thing. Social labelling helps positively with categorising aspects of our social / natural reality. It is the outcome of "noticing differences" (Williams, 2009:425). If one to distinguish among aspects in our social reality, it is a good idea to operate with social labels. Social labelling becomes harmful and indeed unfair when it stops people thriving by illuminating unimportant or irrelevant differences, such that it affects *inter alia* their status in a community. According to Riegel (1998), a social label may be positive or negative. Liu (2000) isolates two categories of negative social labels as follows: formal and informal. Each is differentiated based on the circumstances that motivated the assignment of the label. Whereas formal negative social labels result from institutional sanctions, informal negative social labels results during every day informal social interactions with peers, family and foes (Williams, 2009). Teasing is an illustration of informal negative social labelling (Persaud, 2000) but for negative labels to have an effect,

the victim must be aware of the label. If negative social labels are ascribed to ex-dropouts, it may affect them psychologically in terms of their self-esteem, and socially, in terms of interpersonal interaction (Williams, 2009; Link & Phelan, 1995).

Research has reported strong relationship between negative social labelling and self-esteem and self-worth (Liu, 2000; Williams, 2009). Liu (2000) as well as Zhang (1997) found that negative social labelling results in stigmatisation and low self-worth. Perseud (2000) and Williams (2009) have demonstrated that social labelling culminates in self-fulfilling prophecy, i.e., whereby a person live up to the social label. These impair self-perception. In other words, when negative social labels are assigned, patterns of social interaction may change. The assignment of social label to ex-dropouts at school remains an important concern in the debate about education access. Yet there has been scant regard given to the topic, particularly in the light of the negative effects of such social labels on the person. Thus, this study explores the following:

- a) What social labels have been used to describe ex-dropouts at school?
- b) What are the reactions of ex-dropouts to these social labels?

By virtue of the above, the paper determines the implications of the social labels for the reintegration of ex-dropout in the school context.

Method

This study utilized an exploratory, qualitative approach. This approach has proven to be a useful way to study sensitive opinions, attitudes, preferences, and behaviours of individuals, particularly when the opinions, are reflections of larger underlying attitudinal constructs (Miles & Huberman, 1994). Ex-dropout are learners who had prolonged break from the school context for reasons such as health problems which they may deemed sensitive (Hallman & Grant, 2003). To access the social labels, especially those associated with the drop out causes, required a qualitative approach which places concerns on the feelings of human participants at the centre of the research. Considering that the emphasis in the study was to understand the stories of the ex-dropouts, a narrative design guided the investigation. A narrative design is consistent with the qualitative philosophy. The narrative approach looks at the storied nature of social interaction and considers story a metaphor for human life (Brown, 2005). The stories of ex-dropouts provided access to the social labels used.

Sample and sampling

The study involved a sample of ten ex-dropouts. These individuals were selected as typical case, with selection done purposively, based on typical case criteria, as follows: (a)

length of time out of school, (b) gender, (c) grade level re-enrolled, (d) reasons for dropping out, (e) school type (traditional vs. historically disadvantaged) and (f) the Eastern Cape Province of South Africa. Although it is nonprobability in nature, typical case sampling ensured that cases selected were those likely to behave as most of their counterparts would. Of the 10 ex-dropouts interviewed, five were male. The average age of the sample was 16.

The confidentiality of all participants was assured by having them respond anonymously and using coded themes and pseudonyms. The pseudonyms are used in the reporting of the findings. All participants of the study participated voluntarily.

The school principal acted as a *gatekeeper* in this study. Data was collected through semi-structured interview, which was conducted by after school hours. All interviews were tape-recorded and transcribed verbatim, with the consent of each participant. The mechanical recording of the data and the verbatim accounts were used to ensure trustworthiness of the results (Miles & Huberman, 1994). One question kick-started the interviewing process: “*Tell me about your social experiences with teachers/peers at school since reenrolment?*” Probing questions followed; however, the process involved not just probing but also reflecting (e.g. “Could you tell me more about...”). In this way, the content of each interview was determined by participants. Data analysis was thematic, involving identifying recurrent themes (Miles & Huberman, 1994), linked to the questions investigated. The findings are presented and discussed below.

Findings and Discussion

Negative social labelling and teasing experiences

One of the key evidence of this research is that ex-dropouts were exposed to various antisocial treatments. Antisocial treatments are behaviours that lack consideration for others. These were in the form of negative social labelling and teasing. The antisocial reactions occurred in interactions with, not just peers but also with their teachers. Ex-dropouts were assigned social labels related to the circumstances that caused them to quit school. Ziyanda dropped out of school after learning she was ‘sold’ into marriage. As the action was against her wishes, she did not just run away from school, but also away from her new family, parents, and the community. She explained:

The number of years I spent out of school affected me because when people look at me, I feel guilty for running away from the marriage. I was out of school for three years; I was taken to a husband I hardly knew... He was tall, fat and ugly... The husband was 35 years older. I slept there and during the night, I runaway... [Ziyanda]

Arrangement marriage labels: Arranged marriage is a traditional practice among many African families. Families marry their daughters in the belief the practice keeps a girl away from sexual adventures, but the decision also serves traditionally to strengthen clan relationships and honour traditions (Ingerber-win, 2009). Thus, while the parent's action is rooted in cultural values, it formed the basis of the disruption in their child's schooling and social treatment at school:

At school, they call me 'Nozimasile'; it is the name my in-laws gave me. I don't like that because I'm not 'Nozimasile'; I am not married. I've been *teased* which I hated most because it reminds me of what I went through. But I did it for a good reason: I wanted to carry on with my schooling. I want to show my parents that education is the most important thing parents can give to their children. [Ziyanda]

Social tension is evident in interaction at school as the participant disaffirmed the social identity that she has been ascribed. Clearly, the life of Ziyanda is framed not just by her decisions; cultural values framed her action and position in the community. The strong valuing of the community for traditional marriage meant the participant could not escape the social label or identity of her marriage. The teasing and labelling heightened tension because of the disagreement around the label. To Erikson (in Brown, 2005:394), identity is a process of defining oneself relative to shared characteristics with others. Hall (in Brown, 2005:394) asserts, 'identity has to go through the "eye" of the needle of the other before it can construct itself'. Thus, the social label which Ziyanda sought to lay claim to, did not match the ascriptions by others; that is, the claim was disaffirmed. It is this tension that created the feelings of being teased.

The rejection of the marriage clearly reflects defiance of the cultural values of the community in which she is a member. The decision to return to school also reflects a willingness to confront the multiple socio-cultural challenges, not just at home but in the wider community. And complete schooling. Failed nuptial arrangement is associated with cultural embarrassed for traditional African families (Monekosso, 2009). Failure of 'traditional marriages' is a taboo as it is seen as disgrace, and is interpreted as a failure of the bride's family to fulfil their duties (Monekosso, 2009). Since the 'arranged marriage' label and teasing may have been a form of social punishment, the consequences of violating cultural custom and the teasing must be dealt with, and intermediate positions reached.

Furthermore, it is very clear that the participant wanted schooling over marriage, "...I did it [runaway] for a good reason; I wanted to carry on with my schooling." These quotes

convey a message that education was more important than marriage. The husband's needs must be contrasted with these desires, especially in an African context where the odds of a girl succeeding at school after early marriage are next to nil (Monekosso, 2009). Past research illustrates that in forced marriage situations in Africa, "...girls are pulled from school, forced to drop their education and become wives overnight; they are subordinate to their older partner as they cannot say no to him, or turn to anyone for help" (Monekosso, 2009:1). Furthermore, after early marriage, "...girls have baby within a year" and are exposed to "...motherhood, abuse and trauma from forced sex" (Ingerber-win, 2009:1). This kind of history may have informed Ziyanda's decision, and her willingness to show her "*...parents that education is the most important thing parents can give to their children*".

Teenage pregnancy labels: Girls who returned to school after quitting due to pregnancy also had to confront multiple socio-cultural challenges. Self-searching, wondering and questioning were common reactions among these girls. As ex-dropouts at school, participant Thabisa, Amanda, and Thelma were all ascribed the social label "mother" or "parent". Amanda expressed wonder about the reaction towards her, saying:

"... Now that I am having a child I think they [schoolmates] take me as an adult... They call me mother, and say I don't belong in their age group, though we are the same age; they don't talk to me when I talk to them... but I don't understand what the fuss is about... It's fashionable to have baby at school nowadays".

Likewise, Thabisa showed disgust to being social labelled:

"...I hear them calling me "parent" and showing me an attitude... But they know that I will sort them out [fight them] and put them [schoolmates] in their place."

Thelma reacted, "*...They call me "mother" but it doesn't bother me... am not the only one at school with a baby*". The return of girls after giving birth seems commonplace at the secondary schools sampled in this study. Those ascribing the labels were non-mothers (other girls who never had a child) and boys. Thus, social group categorisation based on motherhood, featured in social interaction, among female students at school. In other words, among girls, intergroup interaction developed cleavages that resemble in-groups and out-groups (Brown, 2013).

The effects of social categorisation and identification are pervasive and powerful. Social psychologists such as Brewer have long reported that while people undertake social categorisation as a necessity, it can lead to a range of biases toward corresponding outgroups

- when its intention is negative - (Brewer, 1997). Thabisa clearly had in mind to, "...sort them [peers] out". And Amanda does not "...Understand what the fuss [about being a mother] is about". These reactions point to feelings of 'us' and 'them' and indicate that intolerance had been fostered between groups.

The normalisation of the presence of teenage mothers at school emerged strongly from the evidence (e.g., "*it's fashionable to have a baby [while] at school nowadays*") and suggests the relax policy toward the return of teenage mothers to finish their education may have accounted for it. A policy formalised in South Africa in 1996, but informally upheld previously by some school principals, allows pregnant girls to stay at school and also allows young mothers to return, if they can manage logistically and financially (Hallman, & Grant, 2003). Thus, while the stigma associated with the label 'mother' may be minimal relative to other social labels, group segregation may be main factor these students have to deal with. Students thrive best in school context defined by a sense of community – i.e., feelings of belonging to the community as a whole (Pooley, Breen, Pike, Cohen & Drew, 2008). For the ex-dropouts, social categorisation is anti-reintegration into the school community, and the maintenance such cleavages are likely to mediate opportunities for cooperation, imitation, interdependence or even mild positivity (Brown, 2013; Link & Phelan, 2006).

Family tragedy related social labels: The powerful effect of stigmatised social labelling was further illustrated in Buyana's experienced. Buyana quitted school to care for his sister who had HIV/AIDS. Two key social reactions occurred when he reenrolled at school. First, rather than being shown compassion amidst his family tragedy, he was social labelled and stigmatised as being "HIV/AIDS positive. Second, he was ostracised and teased. The social label was attributed, not because the participant was diagnosed with disease but because his schoolmates judged that he too had the virus, since he had been nursing his ill-sister. Buyana was amazed:

"...Some of the students give me a tough time... They see me as HIV infected because I was taking care of my sick sister who had HIV/AIDS; ...They did not want to socialize with me because they thought that I was infected... they diagnosed me without testing me, which made me sad and angry... But they know nothing about the pain I felt watching AIDS destroying my sister. They don't know that I am not infected but I was affected"

Prejudice is self evident in the comments. Although the HIV/AIDS identity or social label was rejected, the ascription of the label also created sentiment of intergroup differences. The stigmatised person suffered socially (e.g., ostracism) and psychologically (e.g. shame

associated with the HIV/AIDS stigma). Misconception about the transmission of HIV remains a problem among communities in parts of South Africa, and elsewhere in the world. Although a distinction can be made between being “infected” and “affected” by HIV/AIDS, ignorance persists. Fear of contagion trigger different responses to those affected. Letamo (2005) maintains that HIV/AIDS stigma does influence how people act towards others, and the personal risks they are willing to take. There is still a lot of inaccurate information among teenagers and adults in African society about how HIV is transmitted (Avert, 2009; Kachieng, 2004). Transforming these perceptions and supporting improved interactions among students requires greater emphasis on breaking down misconceptions as these about HIV/AIDS.

Family tragedy also informed the label ascribed to Zanelle. Zanelle’s father murdered his wife, and as son, was labelled “son-of-a-murderer” at school. While all of these incidents revealed the close knittedness of the school and the community, Zanelle felt discomfort, emotional pain, and helplessness at the ascription of the social label:

My father murdered my mother, and I am punished because of my father’s sins... They [students] call me “son of the *murderer*”... School-life is hard for me because they make jokes about the death of my mother... they refused to have me in class with them... they are neglecting me... I feel unwanted; what can I do? [Zanelle]

The “son-of-the-murderer” label carries extremely negative connotations in African societies. The murder of a family/clan member by relatives can carry two connotations. On the one hand, it can be regarded as ‘honour killing’, which occurs when it is believed that the victim brought dishonour to the family, clan or community (Mayell, 2002). However, more powerfully, the deed can be associated with evil. In this case, it is regarded as a ‘sin’ against the earth (Achebe, 1994; Chiamaka, 2010).

The social reaction toward Zanelle at school implies the latter interpretation is invoked. The penalty meted out to both the murderer and his/her family, is often quite severe. In these incidents, the son is viewed as deserving the same punishment as the father. Achebe (1994) maintains that culturally, the penalty for this kind of murder, at a minimum, is ostracism of the perpetrators and their family members from community. Chiamaka (2010) also argues that at an extreme, the punishment may include banishment of the suspect from the village, or death. Supernaturally, it is believed that the ‘Gods’ can administer its own punishment. This may be in the form of the releasing an abominable curse onto the perpetrator of the crime.

The reaction of students and teachers to these incidents illustrated their strong reference to and embeddedness in cultural traditions. In addition to the unlawful nature of murder, which legally must follow its own course, it appears from the way Zanelle is ridiculed and ostracised (peers' refusal to have him in class with them; or neglecting him), that these responses were motivated by strong attachment to traditional cosmocentrism views in the community. In other words, the social label "son-of-the-murderer" appears to be a form of social punishment, serving the family not only as social label but also as a reminder of lowered class status in the community.

Drugs and gang activity related social labels: Mavuso reenrolled at school after two critical life-events: (a) recovering from drug addiction, and (b) being pardoned by his parents for getting a schoolmate pregnant. The participant spoke about a twist of faith in his life:

"I use to take drugs and hang out with friends who used drugs... that's when I dropped out of school first; The second time, I impregnated one girl and my parents wanted to beat me in front of my friends at school... I ran away and didn't go back home nor bother with school... It's a twist of faith that I came back to school, as it only happened after asking for forgiveness from my parents. When I came back, they (students and teachers) call me: (a) 'ntsangwini' and (b) father, and they hesitated to accept me as a change person who wants to do good things... they think I'm still using drugs" [Mavuso].

The social labels "Ntsangwini" (marijuana smoker) and "father" were assigned and used to tease the participant. In other words, deficits were identified in his behaviours and labels assigned. The labels carried different messages and evoked different responses from members (teachers and peers) of the school community. The social identity 'father' was viewed much more positively than 'Ntsangwini', which evoked fear and hostility from teachers and peers. Wider sociocultural developments in the South Africa society may have informed how people viewed and reacted to the participant. Hofstede and Hofstede (2005) labelled South Africa as a masculine society – meaning, its dominant values are money, things (achievements) and assertiveness; they also labelled the society as a patriarchal society – meaning, male are the dominant authority figure, decision makers, hold position of power, and control access to privileges. In this cultural milieu, the social label 'father' is view with prestige. A teenager boy (especially one who has been initiated) impregnating a girl is interpreted as a way to demonstrate his manhood. A boy impregnating a girl is viewed differently socially from a girl who becomes pregnant (Kachieng, 2004). It may be this reason that, while the female mothers who returned to school after giving birth were

perceived and treated with hostility at school, Mavuso was viewed as achieving a status in terms of the label 'father'. The perceptions are culturally embedded.

Hostility towards Mavuso was expressed through labels that resulted from his drug habits. 'Ntsangwini' is a label that describes the abuse of the drug marijuana. The participant acknowledged awareness of the hostility directed at him at school: "...*they think I'm still using drugs... And [they] saw me as a no good person... they hesitated to accept me.*" These suggest prevalence of negative interpersonal interactions. The drug addiction identity motivated *not* just the social label but an attitude of distrust and suspicion towards the participant. From a psychological perspective, drug abuse leads to problems with impulse control and impulsive behaviour (Link & Phelan, 2006). Abuser of marijuana is more likely than non users to engage in behaviours that lead to physical, social and psychological harm (Link & Phelan, 2006). Thus, people are weary of personal risks. Detaching oneself from a reputation of drug addiction is a challenge. Thus, the social label 'Ntsangwini' categorises and separates interpersonal interaction at school, which is consistent with Link and Phelan's (2006) conclusion regarding stigma.

The degree of personal risks which students and teachers feared when exposed in interaction to drug abusers was evident in the students' encounter with Kabelo who was addicted to drugs. Kabelo explained:

"They call me 'Ihlanya' [the one who is insane] as I used to abuse drugs. Because of drugs, I lost my mind and was taken to the rehabilitation centre. When I recovered, one day I went to class and the students [who were there] screamed and climbed onto the desks... they were scared of me, so I had to leave the room... They think I'm still that person who used drugs..."

Kabelo lamented that, "...*I am not getting along with others because they don't trust me... I don't have friends; I am not accepted; I am like a stranger to them*". Feelings of fear, mistrust and scepticism motivated ostracism in interpersonal relationship with ex-dropouts who were labelled drug abusers. Clyde experienced similar scepticism and ridicule, but for different reason; he was involved in gangster life:

We used to break into houses, steal at gun or knife point and sell the things... But I stopped such things and return to school after seeing my friend beaten to death... But nobody wants to accept that I have changed. When I can't answer a question in class, the teacher would say, the only thing 'you know is stealing'.

The social label ‘criminal’ was implicitly ascribed. Clearly, the social labelling and teasing experiences put these ex-dropouts in a disadvantage position at school. Although the sense of belonging is linked to, *inter alia*, respect for teachers, participation, academic success, and liking school (Furman, 2002), this research suggests that experience of teasing, negatively labelling, ostracism and the feelings of isolation meant that the re-enrolled dropouts did not feel a sense of belongingness in the school community. The involvement of teachers in the social labelling and teasing exchange must be particularly worrying for education leaders and managers in South African schools. As adult figures, teachers are important role models for students at school. Their prejudice may be internalised by other students. Children / adolescents, who experience negative social labelling by significant others, may develop feelings that weakened conventional ties. They may find ample opportunities to participate in delinquency as a counter reaction to frustration with the wider conventional community (Beck & Malley, 1998). The action of teachers to social label and tease may lead to further deviance.

Students who feel isolated are more likely to fail (Beck & Malley, 1998), which is disturbing because previous research have shown that academic failure is a major cause of drop out (Brown, 2010; 2013; Chuang, 1997; Erktin et al, 2010). Unless the situation of negative social labelling is reversed, and a strong sense of community is actively cultivated and supported, there is a risk that the re-enrolled dropouts may be pushed out and become victims of repeat drop out at school.

Reactions and ramifications of being negatively social labelled and teased

Emotional reactions: Consistent with previous research (Link & Phelan, 2006), the negative social labelling and teasing experienced evoke particular reactions from each participant. These reactions were emotional in nature; at times it was psychological in nature. Many spoke about feelings of stress, anger and hurt. Feelings of hurt were expressed by all the teenage mothers. A typical example is Amanda’s comments that: “...when you talk to someone and that person does not respond to you [but] only give you a ‘bad look’, you know that she has nothing to say to you... It hurts but I always ignore those looks”. For Ziyanda: “...seeing them [the perpetrators of the social label] at school makes me sad”.

Unhappiness led to feelings of frustration for Buyana and others like him who were stigmatised and teased due to their particular family tragedy. The situation for Zanelle was particularly disturbing as he found himself being denied many of the good things at school and suffering instead more of the bad things. Zanelle stated: “I am not taking part in sport because they [other students] do not want to play with me... I feel sad, and it hurts to see that

most of the people are against me". Being denied the good things socially at school and enduring emotional pain by virtue of their negative social labels and teasing were perhaps the thread that tied all the ex-dropouts together.

Rejection of the informal negative social labels: There was rejection of the informal negative social labels assigned. In other words, the ascription by others was resisted by the victims of the social labels. A typical sentiment of the participants was that despite their transformation, "*...nobody wants to accept that I have changed*". This remark suggests that the social labelling process, and interaction with others, was one characterised by obvious tension and conflict between perpetrators and victims of the social labels. It is important to understand what may have perpetuated the tension. In contrast to formal social labelling, which is applied by social institutions, informal social label, Liu (2000) explains, is applied by acquaintances, peers and families in everyday encounters. Social labels in both of these categories convey particular forms of shaming (Braithwaite, 1989), but the everyday nature of the informal means that the ensuing shaming is direct and immediate. It seems both 'reintegrative' and 'disintegrative' shaming (Braithwaite, 1989) were experienced. While the ex-dropouts were welcomed back to the school community (reintegrative), many were ostracised and viewed as social outcast there (disintegrative). This duality, along with the attempts to disassociate from the negative connotations of the social labels, appears have not only stimulated the rejection of the stigmas but fuelled a degree of confrontation at school.

Stigma process theory (Link & Phelan, 2006) holds that an important part of what goes on in the stigmatisation process is the exercise of power. Victims of negative social labels do not only lose their status, but also experience deep sense of powerlessness. The evidence of this study suggests that ex-dropouts felt not only fearful but powerless to change their past, and to change how they were viewed by others. Reacting to being teased by the teacher, one participant, for instance, noted: "*...I knew I should report the teachers but I didn't want to create a problem that would lead me to drop out again*". Another remarked: "*...They hate me; they say bad things about my family... but what can I do... I want to learn so I have to accept the treatment*". It seems the ex-dropouts recognised they lack the social power to translate their frustration into any significant consequences for the teachers and others who social labelled and teased them. In other words, they did not ordinarily engage in confrontation until they have justified to themselves the morality of their actions.

The evidence of this study did not find support for the key theoretical proposition of the classical social labelling theory. Self-rejection, by self-fulfilling prophecy, is a central tenet of the classical social labelling theory (Liu, 2000). Self-rejecting attitudes, according to

this theory, results in both a weakened commitment to conventional values and the acquisition of motives to deviate from social norms. A sense of anomie then sets in and the social labelled and stigmatised person will form bonds with like-minded, antisocial, peers (Vandelay, 2004).

In the majority of cases in this study, the ex-dropouts dismissed, rather than live up to, or identify with, the social labels that they were given. Individuals stigmatised by family tragedy, child marriage, or drug and gang activity-related social labels such as son-of-a-murderer, HIV/AIDS positive, criminal, or *ihlanya* [insane], for instance, were determined to demonstrate that they did not fit the social labels and would not succumb to them. In other words, they did not hold these social labels as self-fulfilling prophecies – i.e., believed the social labels that were assigned to them or acted in accordance with the social labels. The same sentiment was evident among the ex-dropouts, social labelled mother/parent. While these individuals acknowledged being a parent, but were determined to act as students at school. Two key issues may account for these findings: (a) an emphasis in social labelling theory on the overall population or on formal social labelling, rather than on specific behaviours/reactions or on informal social labelling; (b) recognition on the part of ex-dropouts of the value of education in order to access the labour market, as well as government policy provision which seems to legitimise reenrolment.

Social stress issues: Social stress was a powerful and persistent force in the lives of the ex-dropouts. It seemed the greatest influence that the informal negative social labelling and teasing had on the ex-dropouts was on their self-concept. Experiences of social rejection were a persistent source of social stress. Indeed, emotional pain and feelings of stress, anger and hurt – which occurred particularly during the initial stages of social labelling – were all sources of lowered self-perception and esteem (Link & Phelan, 2006).

Stress is associated with constant threat of being stigmatised. Epidemiological research illustrates that fear of being stigmatised generates harmful health outcomes (Link & Phelan, 1995). A desire to disassociate from social labels such as HIV/AIDS positive, criminal, or *ihlanya* [insane], for instance, seemed to motivate the ex-dropouts to constantly evaluate themselves in interaction with other learners. They held urges to prove that they were different from the negative social labels ascribed to them. Such efforts to cope have shown in previous research to lead to hypertension, and other health problems as well as educational development (Link & Phelan, 1995). The implication is that instead of focusing on academic performance or on interpersonal development, the stigmatised ex-dropouts may well be using valuable time to complain about instances of hostility and antisocial treatment.

Conclusion: Overcoming ex-dropout social labelling and supporting their reintegration at schools

The study explored the forms of social labels used to define the social life of ex-dropouts at secondary schools. The research found negative social labelling and teasing as a persistent force in ex-dropout lives at schools and that, consistent with the modified social labelling theory proposed by Link and colleagues (Link, Cullen, Struening, Shrout, & Dohrenwend, 1989), these experiences were persistent sources of social stress for the ex-dropouts in this study. There is a tacit link between the informal negative social labels ascribed and the reasons why ex-dropouts quitted school. This is tentative indication that ex-dropouts continue to suffer beyond the initial circumstances that pushed them out of school in the first place. The reasons for the general tendency to ascribed social labels appear related to multiple socio-cultural, historical, and antisocial forces that operate at the individual, societal and traditional cosmocentrism levels.

There is support for the key tenets of stigma process theory. Various auxiliary outcomes, suffered by ex-dropouts who experienced the negative social labels and teasing, were mainly socio-psychological in nature, such as fractured self-perceptions and self-worth. The negative social labels and teasing reflected relational aggression. This was a key force that further influenced both the wider school climate and dropout reintegration. Relational aggression was a major factor in the interpersonal encounters. This may be indication that the larger development potential of ex-dropout reintegration at school remains unfulfilled, and may continue to be so until the school context is transformed. Furthermore, the ex-dropout social experience needs to be address because without any change, building a healthy self-concept, and developing socially, will remain a challenge in the light of negative social labels and teasing. As instructional leader, the role of the school leader in supporting ex-dropouts at school is essential. For sustainability, and broad base participation, reintegration should be anchored on a school-wide strategy.

One of the main features of any school-wide strategy developed should be the creation of space for dialogue. Ongoing dialogue among teachers, students and school leaders can drive back boundaries of misconceptions and lead to better understanding. As we have seen in this research, much of the stigma was based on misconceptions of the issue on which the social label was based. Improved understanding through dialogue can promote and build a school culture that supports ex-dropout reintegration.

In addition to dialogue, disciplinary actions against perpetrators of social labelling should form a core part of the school-wide strategy. Overcoming tendency to stigmatise

others takes practice and thought. However, sanction should be supported with counselling. Perpetrators should undergo developmental training to manage their habits. Hacker (2008) puts it succinctly, “we need [training] designed to assist perpetrators translate negative social labels into positive words”. These efforts may contribute to transforming the learning context.

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