

CARE-LEAVERS' EXPERIENCES OF HOW MANAGED OPPORTUNITIES FOR INDEPENDENCE CONTRIBUTED TO BUILDING RESILIENCE

Joyce Hlungwani and Adrian D. van Breda

Abstract: Care-leaving literature widely utilizes resilience theory. This is due to an acknowledgment that while young people who grew up in care frequently achieve poorer outcomes during their transition from care to independent adulthood, some do well despite their challenges. Resilience research is also increasingly interested in the factors that promote resilient functioning during the transition out of care. However, research on how to build young people's resilience while in care is limited. This paper introduces the notion of "managed opportunities for independence" (MOI), which are guided activities for young people that involve them acting independently. We explore the contribution of MOI in building the resilience of young people in care. Nine care-leavers who had disengaged from various residential care centers in South Africa were purposively sampled. The study employed a qualitative approach and a grounded theory design, with semi-structured individual interviews. Findings depict the range of MOI that care-leavers experienced, the ways in which these benefited them since leaving care, the kinds of independence they currently display as a result, and their suggestions for improving MOI. Implications for practice include proceduralizing MOI and making greater use of such opportunities to prepare young people for leaving care.

Keywords: independent adulthood, residential care, managed opportunities for independence, resilience, leaving care

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Research focusing on the resilience of young people who have left care is gaining traction (van Breda, 2021). While care-leaving studies have tended to report on the challenges and poor outcomes associated with the transition from care to independent adulthood (Heerde et al., 2018), research is increasingly acknowledging the capacity shown by some care-leavers to achieve better-than-expected outcomes (Crous et al., 2021), despite the risk factors associated with transitioning from care (Reynolds et al., 2018; Rome & Raskin, 2019). There also appears to be increasing attention on the factors that contribute to the resilience of young people during the transitioning process (Dumont et al., 2022; Haddow et al., 2021; Lou et al., 2018; van Breda & Hlungwani, 2019).

Ungar and Theron (2020) asserted that understanding young people's resilience requires looking into the multiple systems that interact to facilitate coping in the face of adversity. According to van Breda (2021), resilience resources are found at different levels of functioning, including the personal and the environmental. Access to structural support during the transition from care is also crucial in pushing young people towards resilience (Hokanson et al., 2019). However, in contexts such as South Africa, where policy provisions and access to structural resources to support the transition from care to independent living remain a challenge (van Breda & Dickens, 2016), it is crucial to consider how the care system can foster young people's resilience, making them better able to navigate the challenges that come with transitioning, even with limited access to structural resources.

The process of transitioning from care to independent adulthood should ideally be gradual (Ferguson, 2018; Gwenzi, 2023), with young people afforded space to address the traumas that initially resulted in their placement in care (Liabo et al., 2017) and time to adequately prepare themselves for the challenging transition from care to independent adulthood (Stein & Verweijen-Slamnescu, 2012). However, child care policies typically focus on the immediate care and protection needs of young people (Republic of South Africa, 2019), with limited attention given to building young people's capacity to manage the complex transitioning journey (Stein & Verweijen-Slamnescu, 2012; van Breda et al., 2022). This is particularly the case when transitioning from residential care, which is typically more isolating and restrictive than other types of alternative care (Rauktis et al., 2020).

Resilience literature recognizes, however, that exposure to limited adversity enhances one's capacity to successfully engage with challenging events thereafter (Rutter, 2012). It appears, therefore, that exposure to manageable amounts of risk (Ungar, 2007), as would normally occur when interacting with one's environment, is essential for healthy development: such exposure creates manageable opportunities to build and mobilize resilience processes. This implies that titrated exposure to stress, challenge, or adversity (Rutter, 2012) while still in care is needed to build young people's resilience.

However, the care system globally is characterized by overregulation (Republic of South Africa, 2005) and an overemphasis on risk avoidance (Alfandari et al., 2023; Anglin, 2002; Lwin et al., 2024), which deprives young people in care of opportunities to develop resilience (Ungar, 2007). This is despite evidence that the care-leaving population experiences more challenging transitions to adulthood than their peers in the general population (Arnett, 2015) due to insufficient preparation for dealing with transitional challenges (McGhee & Deeley, 2022; Stein, 2012).

While there is a growing body of literature focused on factors that foster the resilience of young people during the transition to adulthood (Hokanson et al., 2019; Pessoa et al., 2018; van Breda, 2015), few of these studies look at the development of resilience of young people in care (Haddow et al., 2021). Thus, there remains a gap in research on enhancing young people’s resilience while still in care.

Furthermore, while care-leaving literature recognizes that positive outcomes during the transition from care to independent adulthood can be enhanced through adequate preparation (Harder et al., 2020; Palmer et al., 2022) and resilience building (Mamelani Projects, 2013; van Breda, 2017), there is only limited research that explores programs that develop the resilience of young people in care. Also, there is a need for research that represents the voices of young people who have left care, to provide feedback on whether programs they experienced in care facilitated their resilient functioning outside of care.

Over the years, the authors had conversed informally with practitioners about resilience-building and preparation for leaving care. Inadequate preparation for leaving care emerged as a central concern. Frequently noted was the view that residential care programs did not adequately prepare young people to function in the community after leaving care. However, despite acknowledging that equipping young people for independent functioning through practising independence whilst still in care was crucial, practitioners expressed that this was “risky” for both young people and practitioners. Furthermore, practitioners did not have a term to describe such practices.

We have therefore coined the term “managed opportunities for independence” (MOI). MOI refers to opportunities for young people in care to practise independence, exercise responsibility, and build resilience. The managed (M) component emphasizes the importance of risk assessment and management to minimize the chance that young people will come to harm during MOI.

In care-leaving literature, the concept of “independence” is not always seen as an appropriate goal for care-leavers — the term “interdependence” is often preferred (Storø, 2018). This is particularly true in South Africa, where the notion of *ubuntu* is championed, which stresses the fundamental interdependence of people (van Breda, 2019). Nevertheless, “independence” remains the predominant term. We suggest that independence is a necessary component of interdependence, and that interdependence is similarly necessary for independence. Further, “survivalist self-reliance” (Samuels & Pryce, 2008) is an extreme form of independence that we

are not advocating; and dependence is an extreme form of interdependence that we are also not advocating.

MOI, which centers on providing young people in care opportunities to transition gradually to independent functioning, is an important concept that needs to be explored. In the context of residential care, which is generally restrictive, MOI can be perceived as a risky exercise that can potentially harm young people. As a result, child care workers tend to shy away from affording young people in their care MOI (Hlungwani & van Breda, 2022). However, parenting literature recognizes that exposing children to risk in controlled settings is a normal part of parenting (Ungar, 2007). Exposure to manageable risk builds one's capacity to successfully engage with subsequent risks, which Rutter (2012, p. 337) referred to as a "steeling effect".

Therefore, this paper aims to explore care-leavers' perceptions of the ways in which MOI contributed to their resilient functioning outside of care. We begin by reviewing the literature to contextualize the MOI concept within resilience theory before outlining the qualitative methodology employed for the study. We then present our findings, detailing the four themes we found to be central to the participants' perceptions and experiences of MOI. Lastly, we discuss our findings and the implications for practice.

Literature Review

Globally, the transition of young people from alternative care to independent adulthood continues to receive attention in the literature (Frimpong-Manso, 2018; Takele & Kotecho, 2020; van Breda et al., 2020). Among the variety of topics addressed in care-leaving research, post-care outcomes are among the most researched (Dickens, 2018; Gwenzi, 2023; Hokanson et al., 2019), partly due to an acknowledgement that young people who grow up in care are likely to experience a more challenging transition to independent adulthood than young people in the general population (Arnett, 2015; Dickens & Marx, 2018).

One factor contributing to a challenging transition from care to independent adulthood is inadequate preparation (Mamelani Projects, 2015; Refaeli et al., 2013), which many researchers have reported to be a persistent gap in the child care system (Bond, 2018). This reflects the fact that the child care system tends to emphasize protection and risk prevention (Anglin, 2002; Republic of South Africa, 2019) over the developmental needs of young people in care (Masten & Narayan, 2012). While protecting young people against harm or risk is crucial, particularly considering the adversities many young people in care have endured (Liabo et al., 2017), some have argued that overemphasizing safety and risk avoidance may compromise healthy development (Anglin, 2002; Ungar, 2007).

Residential care is particularly restrictive compared to other forms of alternative care (Rauktis et al., 2020). As a result, residential care denies young people the freedom to explore their environment on their own, which is essential for building their resilience (van Breda, 2015).

Without opportunities to practise independence while growing up in care, young people experience an instantaneous and often traumatizing transition from an overly protective environment to communities that expect them to function independently (Stein, 2006).

In resilience theory, adversity must be present before one can talk meaningfully about protective factors and resilient outcomes (Masten & Monn, 2015; Stein, 2005). However, one cannot be said to be resilient without evidence of adaptation taking place, either in the face of or in the wake of adversity (Rutter, 2012; van Breda, 2018a). Thus, while young people who grow up in care have generally experienced adverse events (Liabo et al., 2017), they can be considered resilient only if they achieve better-than-expected outcomes (van Breda, 2018a). While young people can arguably show the ability to “do well” whilst in care despite pre-care and in-care adversities, it remains crucial to investigate young people’s resilience during the challenging period of life after care (Arnett, 2015; van Breda et al., 2020).

People who successfully engage with adversity and achieve positive outcomes do so with the help of protective factors and processes, which work to oppose risk factors, facilitating adaptation (Masten & Barnes, 2018). Protective processes operate at different levels of functioning, from the personal to the environmental (van Breda, 2021; Zabern & Bouteyre, 2018). Young people transitioning from care to independent adulthood draw from various personal and environmental factors that professionals can mobilize whilst the young person is still in care. MOI, which allows young people to exercise independence and deal with manageable amounts of risk, can foster resilience processes while they are still in care.

Methodology

Approach and Design

This study employed a qualitative, exploratory design (Fouché & de Vos, 2011). Although a growing body of literature addresses the topics of preparation and resilience building, there is no empirical research on the concept of MOI. Thus, an exploratory approach was selected as best suited for this study, since it allows for an in-depth exploration. A constructivist grounded theory design, rooted in symbolic interactionism (Charmaz, 2014), informed the research process. The study focused on care-leavers’ personal experiences of, and views about, the contribution of MOI to their resilience after leaving residential care. The grounded theory design allowed for closely focusing on the participants’ interactions with their environments.

Population and Sampling

The study was conducted in Gauteng, which is the most densely populated province in South Africa, and thus has the most children in care. The population comprised young people who had disengaged from the care of various residential care facilities, which are referred to as child and youth care centers (CYCCs) in South Africa. Participants were selected using purposive sampling (Taherdoost, 2016) from those 21 years and older who had disengaged from care at least two years

before data collection, which allowed sufficient time for them to experience independent living and reflect on possible experiences of MOI. In addition, participants needed to have lived in a CYCC for at least 4 years and had been afforded MOI during their stay. Data saturation was reached after nine interviews.

Participants were recruited with the help of CYCC managers and child and youth care workers (CYCWs) who identified and made initial contact with prospective participants. Detailed information about the sampling criteria was provided to the CYCC managers and CYCWs. The contact details of those who agreed to participate in the study were shared with the researcher, who contacted prospective participants for further screening to ensure that they met the sampling criteria before conducting interviews.

Table 1. *Profile of Participants*

Pseudonym	Sex assigned at birth	Age	Years in care	Year of leaving care	Living arrangements	Employment
Ayanda	Male	22	5	2018	Renting own place	Employed
Ben	Male	22	6	2018	Living with family	Self-employed
Charles	Male	23	6	2016	Renting own place	Self-employed
Diana	Female	26	7	2013	Living in own house	Employed
Elliot	Male	26	12	2013	Renting own place	Employed
Fatima	Female	23	4	2015	Living with family	Unemployed
Gugu	Female	27	4	2011	Own place	Self-employed
Hlayi	Female	22	5	2016	Living with family	Self-employed
Ivy	Female	23	5	2017	Living with family	Unemployed

Table 1 shows that four males and five females participated in the study. Participants' ages ranged from 22 to 27. The number of years of living in care was 4 to 12. All participants had disengaged from care at least 4 years before data collection. Most participants lived independently and earned an income (either employed or self-employed).

Data Collection

Semi-structured interviews (Greeff, 2011) were used to collect data, and questions were focused on the participants' experiences of MOI whilst in care and their perceptions of how MOI contributed to their resilience after disengaging from care. Interviews were conducted in English — the language used in the CYCCs. Interviews encouraged a holistic exploration of the topic while allowing participants to guide the process, in line with grounded theory's interactional focus (Charmaz, 2014). Due to the restrictions that were in place to prevent the spread of COVID-19 at the time of data collection, interviews were conducted online in October to November 2020. Interviews lasted 60 to 90 minutes. With the participants' consent, all interviews were recorded and transcribed.

Data Analysis

Following grounded methods of analyzing data (Charmaz, 2014), transcripts were checked against the original interview recordings to allow for the addition of any details that were omitted in the initial transcripts. The second step involved assigning codes to text — line-by-line coding. Thereafter, codes that appeared frequently and those relevant to the study’s objectives were highlighted. The constant comparison step followed, which involved identifying and refining codes that appeared across transcripts, allowed for the identification of broader themes. The last step involved checking themes against initial codes to ensure that themes were grounded in data.

Trustworthiness

Various trustworthiness constructs (Lincoln & Guba, 1985) were ensured during the study. The grounded theory method’s step-by-step data analysis enhanced the study’s *credibility*, which was further enhanced through rigorous engagement with the data to ensure that findings were grounded in data. The study’s *confirmability* was promoted by following a logical research process that can be repeated in other settings. The study’s *dependability* was facilitated by documenting the research process and leaving a clear audit trail.

Ethics

Participation in this study was voluntary, and the right of participants to refuse or withdraw from participation at any stage of the research was emphasized. Informed consent forms were completed and signed before data collection. Participants were informed before their interviews that, while confidentiality would be ensured, should they reveal information pointing to possible abuse of the participant or another child in care, the researcher’s ethical obligation to ensure the safety and protection of children in care would require them to follow up on the matter. Anonymity was promoted by removing all participants’ identifying information from transcripts and using pseudonyms in the report. A counselling referral system was arranged before the interviews for participants who needed it. The Faculty of Humanity’s Research Ethics Committee at the University of Johannesburg approved the study (REC-01-041-2019).

Findings

Four themes emerged as central to the participants’ experiences and views about MOI:

- MOI afforded in care: The various MOI activities afforded to young people in care, which are aimed at contributing to resilient functioning outside of care.
- The perceived benefits of MOI: Young people’s views about the advantages of exposure to MOI in residential care.
- Indicators of independent functioning: Examples of current functioning that young people see as evidence of their ability to function independently.
- MOI and aftercare suggestions: Young people’s views about ways the child care system can better respond to the needs of young people who grow up in residential care.

MOI Activities Afforded in Care

As stated by Hlungwani and van Breda (2022), CYCWs, in collaboration with those filling other roles in a CYCC, play a crucial role in ensuring that the opportunities for independence afforded to young people are carefully assessed, and that possible risks to young people are minimized. Participants in this study felt that the risks were sufficiently managed during their engagement in the opportunities for independence that were afforded them. Participants described a variety of activities as contributing to their independent functioning. As shown in the following quotations, some of the opportunities focused on exposing young people to everyday life skills, which young people growing up in residential care do not usually have a chance to experience:

We were taught how to cook for the staff, give them food, and serve them. Then at the end they would pay us; not individually, but they would put in one basket, and we share. And then when you leave the CYCC, you get your money. I think those are the opportunities that I think they were preparing me. (Ayanda)

Hlayi reflected on how she was inspired during her school holidays visits by seeing what her peers in the community were able to do, and decided to ask the CYCWs to afford her opportunities to learn similar skills:

I used to help out in the kitchen with the mothers and I learned how to cook and to do my laundry. I used to wash my school uniform by hand; I didn't use the washing machine. I wanted to learn those sorts of things. And also, I would volunteer and do the gardening with the uncle and help out. So those kinds of experiences really helped me when I got out of [the CYCC].

While Hlayi perceived the above opportunities as empowering in that they helped her learn what her community considered age-appropriate chores, some child care contexts view such chores as child labor or exploitation (van Breda et al., 2022).

Diana, reflecting on the differences between the two CYCCs she had lived in, appreciated being exposed to MOI in the second CYCC:

It was a bit different from [the first CYCC I stayed at]; [at the second CYCC] I was given opportunities to grow. We would go to after-school classes, we were given pocket money, and we had to manage the pocket money for the whole month. We were given toiletries, the washing powder that we were given was for three months. It was the machine soap, and we had to manage it for three months. And the other toiletries were given on a monthly basis, but they did not give us everything; we had to buy some with the pocket money that we were given.

As demonstrated by Ben's quote below, some MOI activities, which were aimed at building young people's mental capacities while empowering them with useful skills, involved exposing them to potentially risky situations:

He [a CYCW] then made me part of a lot of the programs where I get to meet with other people and talk with them. Also, there is this program called the Presidential Awards. It is a program for leadership training. You go through a set of training and a set of leadership programs that they put you through, in order to help you stand out when you go into the community and really can make a difference.... Going into that I went to the military camp in [province 1]. I went there for two weeks. We went through training; we went through physical training as well, mental training, political training to help us understand more.

Some young people were afforded opportunities to explore and become confident in their talents, which proved useful in their lives after care:

Then I started doing dance. One of the things that got me comfortable at that place was when I started making a few friends. Then with the art part we started going out very often. So, I started enjoying the trips and then one of my favorite trips was when we had to go and perform for [Politician 1]. (Charles)

Elliot explained that he discovered his love for the performing arts through an opportunity he was afforded in care. This later became his full-time career, which he reported he was passionate about:

It was a Christmas party at [CYCC1]. I remember there was no MC or entertainment. I remember going to the management and asking them, volunteering to be an MC, and they allowed me. There I was, entertaining people and running the show. I even did the program and after that, even at school I was doing arts and culture. I was involved in arts and culture because of that opportunity that I got at [CYCC1]. And later on, I was taken to an audition. There was an audition that was happening at [Theatre 1]. Then I decided I wanted to grab that opportunity and they took me there, and there I was, the only black person that was there.

Earning an income is an essential element of independent functioning, and it appears that some CYCCs invested in empowering young people with employment-related skills, which participants valued as contributing to improving their chances of finding employment after leaving care, as in the following examples:

They gave me an opportunity to work as an assistant at the book shop; that is where it started. That way they were preparing me for when I would have to work in the outside world. They taught me about time management, they taught me how to behave at work, so I used to wake up early in the morning and go to work and come

back from work when the bookshop closed. I was obeying their rules, according to what I was told. They taught me about honesty and loyalty. I learned how to be honest with money without having anyone watching over me. So, it taught me a lot about life in general. (Ivy)

They [a private company] looked at my results because I had passed my matric [Grade 12, secondary school]. Then in December, I got a call, and they told me that they like for me to come and work there [at their office]. They had to teach me how to use a computer from scratch, taught me how to work with emails, photocopying and everything office related. When she [a lady from outside of the CYCC who helped with the work training] saw that I could do the work, she said I could then go and work with other people. At the beginning she was just training me and later on she felt that I could now start working with other people. So, I started working with other people, but I was still in care. (Fatima)

Perceived Benefits of MOI

Care-leaving research acknowledges that many young people leave care without adequate preparation (Bond, 2018), arguably contributing to negative outcomes. The practice of MOI is centered around preparation, as it provides opportunities for young people to practise independence and gradually become self-reliant and competent, which builds their resilience.

The participants in this study appeared to feel that the benefits of being afforded MOI came not only after leaving care but also immediately, as MOI contributed to resilience-building whilst they were still in care. For example, reflecting on when she was afforded the opportunity to work in a book shop, Ivy talked about how this helped her gain confidence in her abilities and made her feel that she was trusted as someone capable:

I was happy because they trusted me. They looked at me and thought I would be able to do great, which is something I think they saw in me. And I did everything they expected me to do. I was also happy that I never disappointed them.

Ben expressed how being selected to be part of a program made him feel important and seen — that his CYCW cared about his future and his goals:

I was seen as an individual who has feelings; who has goals, who has a mission; who wants to survive and succeed one day. So, it brought me great joy, it brought me great honor to be a part of the program with people that identify me as a person.

As demonstrated in the following examples, it appears that being afforded MOI built young people's confidence and sense of competence:

I was excited, because when I finished cooking, everyone would say your food is nice and I gained confidence from that. (Hlayi)

It's hard to say [laughs], but it [learning to bake a cake] was exciting, and I know that it cannot be like hundred percent, but it was lovely. Just the sense of ownership that I am the one that baked. That was exciting for me, and it was like, oh wow, I made it! (Gugu)

Life in residential care does not reflect what young people are typically exposed to in the community after leaving care, particularly those who transition into under-resourced communities. MOI bridges the gap between in-care life, where young people are fully protected and provided for, and community life, where young people must fend for themselves. Fatima spoke of this:

There are lots of things happening in the outside world that we don't get to see while we are inside. Because while in care you are protected, and you don't experience things that are happening outside. Those opportunities are very good, and I wish other young people too can receive those opportunities.

When asked about his views on affording young people in care MOI, Elliot said it was useful to consider that life does not end in care, and that young people needed to be prepared for what they would face after care:

I can say that giving opportunities in care is the best because remember that they [young people in care] grow up and they will not be in care forever. So, preparing them for the real world at a young age is the best. In the real world you face many challenges and are just warming them up [preparing them] for the real world. Because remember that in the real world you do not get things from a single place, you don't wake up and just get breakfast. In the real world you have to hustle and work.

Ayanda also emphasized the importance of affording young people opportunities to prepare for the realities of the outside world:

The world can just show you flames! Some things, like you do not know what is happening and you do not know the reality of things. I do not know how to depend on myself outside and provide for myself, because I was taught how to sit and receive.... It is rough, [like] sometimes going out and seeing a young person that you were [in care] with [living] in the streets.

In the following extract, Ivy acknowledges that MOI came with challenges, which helped her become brave. She also seems to view the opportunity as having contributed to her ability to handle challenging or risky situations outside of care:

It was helpful because it came as a challenge, and through the experience, I was able to become brave and that allowed me to learn how to handle risky situations on my own. I was also able to learn to earn and handle my home situation on my own.

Ivy's account of becoming "brave" illustrates Rutter's (2012) view of challenges or adversity producing a "steeling effect". Ben further illustrates this with a driving metaphor to show that exposure to challenging situations builds one's ability to deal successfully with future challenges:

I will use a simple example quickly. If you have to climb into a really fast car and you are able to drive that car at full speed and still control it 100%, then it will not be that hard for you to get into a car that is very slow and driving it at full speed and controlling it.

When the researcher commented to Ben about the potential risks of involving young people in care in MOI, Ben summarized the importance of building young people's resilience with another metaphor:

One thing I realized from the program as well, and the reason why they start with you that young, is because it helps equip you more. I do not know if you are familiar with the [isiZulu] phrase "*ligotshwa lisemanzi, maselikhulile liyophuka*" [a branch is shaped when it is still green and young, because a dry and mature branch will tend to break when bent]. It uses the metaphor of a tree, like if you want to shape a tree, you do it while it is still small because once it grows, you will break it... The benefits of it today, I can only say that I am thankful that I went through the program at that age, because starting at a young age helped me acquire more than what I would have done if I started when I was 18. Then I would have lost five years of my life where I would have been able to acquire these skills.

Indicators of Independent Functioning

This theme reflects young people's ability to function independently outside of the CYCC. As demonstrated in previous sections, the intended benefit of MOI is to ensure that young people are equipped to function outside the safety net of the care system. When asked to comment on their ability to live independently, participants were very confident. While they acknowledged the challenges they experienced, they seemed to believe that they were equipped to deal with the transitioning challenges.

Ayanda did not have a family to return to after leaving care, but he found work and a place to live, while also studying. As shown in the following extract, he was quite proud of the life he had made for himself:

I am able to focus very well, and I am able to make decisions. Being here, number one, I have taken a decision to be where I am. Being different, thinking about myself and everything that I do every day, thinking about what is right and what is not right. I do manage; just imagine, I do work and study. You know, just work and study, not because of your grandfather or your uncle. I do have a father who is not in my life. Just looking at myself and thinking here I am alone and just deciding.

Ben lived with his parents. While he had a tattoo business, he had no stable income to afford rent. He was, however, very confident about his ability to function independently and had some good plans about how he would market his business:

I would say the ability to function, it doesn't rely on the ability to get a job. To function in society is to be able to adapt. And coming out [of care], I had to adapt to society. I had to realize that life outside is not a life in care. It is two different things. It was easier for me to adapt because I have used those skills with people; where I would be in a room full of people, and everybody wanted to be in my company because I know how to mix with people.

Charles was self-employed at the time of data collection, as he did different things to earn an income, including deejaying. He was renting his own place and spoke of a good relationship he had with his daughter and his mother:

It is not the life that I want and considering my age and the difference that I have already made, I can say that I am getting there. I have made a lot of responsible decisions. I am not having any complaints about my daughter and me not supporting her and all those things. And then with me, I actually describe myself as a random hustler. I do not care if I have to go pick up the bins or something, as long as I am getting what I want for me and for the people that I love. I am managing to buy a lot of things for my girl [daughter] and I am managing to help my mother.... What I know is that I am a very responsible person.

Diana was proud of how far she had come since leaving care. Despite some struggles along the way, she had managed to buy a piece of land and was building a house. She had secured a permanent job with a financial institution and reported having a good relationship with her child and partner. She also shared that she took on the responsibility to revisit the CYCC and help motivate those still in care:

But recently, I visited [the CYCC] and was telling the children that when they start looking for jobs, people would not be interested in their background; they will ask for the same things they ask from any other person. They will want to know if you have matric [Grade 12] and a relevant diploma. They won't ask whether you have a mother or a father; they are not interested in that.

Elliot described his ability to function independently as “great”; he had established some community projects, was happy with his career path and was very optimistic about the future. He repeatedly expressed gratitude for the opportunities he had been afforded in care, which he said had contributed to his ability to make responsible decisions:

The choices that I made work for me because, to be honest, I don't smoke, don't drink, I don't steal; because I took every opportunity that I got from [the CYCC] into consideration. I did not take the opportunities for granted and that's why I am where I am today.

Fatima was living with her parents and not employed at the time of data collection. She was, however, very hopeful about the future and proud of her ability to take care of her child's needs:

It was very useful. Like I said, I can now do these things at home; I can cook for my family and keep my space clean. I can put things together to make sure that my child does not starve.

Gugu reported taking care of her brother and her child. She was also running a cake-baking business: she had developed her passion for baking through the MOI afforded her in care. While she reported going through challenges, she also demonstrated tenacity and a sense of responsibility:

They retrenched us and I went back to square one. And then from there I tried opening a business. Okay, my business was coming along and then load shedding [scheduled electricity outages] started. When that started everything fell apart. This side I am baking, and I do get orders, but there was a time that I felt it was too much. I do not know what to do. I just don't know what to do, but I cannot give up.

Hlayi lived with family and was self-employed at the time of data collection. She reported starting a small business selling used clothes so that she could take care of her and her child's needs:

For example, my parents would go to [another country] maybe for two months and leave me with an amount of money, and I am able to manage that money so that I do not struggle. Yes, I am able to buy things that I know will last me and not just things for the moment; like, I think about the future. I am able look after my baby and to buy things for my baby and also myself.

As a process, resilience is not static but requires continuously engaging with one's environment. As van Breda (2015) stated, young people continuously and consciously engage with their environment to identify opportunities that help them meet their resilient goals. Ivy nicely captured this view:

What they do is provide a start for us, with all the skills you get there. As for what happens outside, it depends on what opportunities you will get and how you approach those opportunities. So, what they teach us inside helps us to know how to respond to different situations because once people go outside, you find that some are suicidal because they were not given opportunities like what some of us were given, you see.

MOI and Aftercare Suggestions

The participants' voices about what could be done to improve the care system emerged strongly in their MOI and aftercare suggestions. Though appreciative of the MOI afforded to them, they also expressed that they observed gaps regarding the opportunities afforded young people in residential care. In addition, participants said that a holistic approach to supporting care-experienced young people to take their place in society should include an investment in aftercare services.

Responding to the question about what CYCCs could do to better prepare young people for life after care, Ayanda said:

Let's say I am in a CYCC, and you know that I am looking for job, you can say, "Let us take [this looked-after young person] for interviews and help him apply for jobs". Say I get a job, and I am leaving in six months, you can say, "Okay, our car will take you to work, but later in the evening, you come back" [i.e., find your own way back to the CYCC after work]. That is the way of preparing, you know. That might be against the rules, but I think they will be preparing you.

With the unemployment rate continuously rising for young people in South Africa, it is not surprising that participants felt that providing young people in care with opportunities to improve their chances of finding work after leaving care is crucial. Diana also provided an illustration of the employment theme:

Like, if they can run a program where young people in care, like those who are in Grade 11, can be assisted to get their learner's [driving] licence and have computer skills where they get a certificate, so that when they leave, they have something. I remember this one guy at my home: they helped him focus on his computer skills and when he left, he was able to find a job and he built a house for his parents.

As an artistic person who makes a living through the arts, Ben's suggestion for MOI is concerned with providing opportunities to young people in care to explore their talents:

We have to start finding their passion, we have to start finding their individual talents and then how it can grow from there. I have an amazing drawing talent. I draw portraits of people; I draw to a point where if you have to look at a picture and look at my drawing it will be identical to that.

Gugu reported having developed her passion for baking in care, which she has turned into a business venture outside. However, she noted that CYCCs did not implement MOI formally, which she felt meant it was not valued:

I do not think it was really part of the program or if it was part of the program, I do not think they did implement the strategy and that it was not well organized. So,

you know if I had that opportunity, I am sure that today I would be telling you a different story. So even with those opportunities where they teach people to, say, do baking, I am sure someone can use that skill outside. But I just do not think that that the opportunities were implemented in that manner. It does not really give you enough to go out there [and] use the skill.

One of the distinguishing factors between young people who grow up in care and those in the general population is that the latter usually have the safety net of a family to fall back on should they encounter challenges during their transition to independent living. The participants' view, therefore, is that helping young people manage independent functioning requires thinking beyond what is done in care:

Imagine a child leaving at 18 years, and the system does not wonder where the child is going. Some children did not even do well at school.... I assume they have connections with some institutions outside to help them teach young people, so they have something to fall [back] on. Because that child depends on you [the CYCC]; he/she does not have anyone who can help them. I am just saying that if they can have that mindset of thinking, "after center, what then?" [i.e., what will happen to this young person after they leave the CYCC?], instead of just focusing on education "after school, what then?" [i.e., what will happen when a young person finishes schooling?], I think that [thinking beyond life in care] could have really made a difference in some children's lives. (Gugu)

Many South African young people who grew up in care return to families that cannot meet their aftercare needs, as Ivy illustrated:

There is still that feeling that I need them to be involved in my life because of some of the things at home. Like the family that I come from... there are still some issues and that makes me feel a bit behind. I want to push myself to be independent, but I feel I would still need to go back to them to ask for assistance with the things I need to do.

Ayanda further emphasized the need for some support after leaving care, maintaining that the need for aftercare not only involves offering some assistance, but is also a way of showing continued care:

I spent time with them [the CYCWs], and I started seeing some of them as my fathers and my mothers, and when I am outside I am still expecting love from them. Like what is going to happen now? Mothers are supposed to show love to their children. When I am outside, I am still expecting love from them. I think checking up on the young guys who have left; that shows caring. Caring must not only happen when you are inside, no, no! They stayed with us, they walked with us and they are the ones that taught us what life is like outside.

Limitations

Care-leavers who were not afforded MOI during their time in care were excluded from this study, which limits the generalizability of our findings. MOI is a new term. We developed the concept through conversations with CYCC practitioners and care-leaving researchers, then coined the term MOI and have explored it through this study. However, the conversations did not include everyone working or researching in the field. This could have contributed to CYCC gatekeepers not understanding the MOI concept and sampling criteria, and erroneously concluding that they did not offer MOI in their institutions. Furthermore, the sample size of nine is relatively small, limiting the findings' generalizability.

Discussion

Care-leaving research increasingly focuses on the resilience of young people after leaving care (Hokanson et al., 2019; van Breda, 2018b), as opposed to their poor outcomes, which are typically associated with the process of transitioning from care to independent adulthood (Dickens & Marx, 2018). Resilience-focused care-leaving research is interested in the ability of some care-leavers to achieve better-than-expected outcomes (van Breda, 2018a), despite evidence that care-leavers generally achieve poor outcomes during the transition to adulthood (Dickens & Marx, 2018; Gwenzi, 2018). Indeed, there is evidence that some care-leavers do well and can navigate transitional challenges successfully (van Breda, 2015). This study also found that many participants reported doing well during their transition from care.

Consistent with previous research findings, participants reported that life in residential care is generally characterized by restrictions (Rauktis et al., 2020), with minimal opportunities to practice independence and build resilience (Masten, 2014). Being afforded MOI, therefore, was experienced as empowering. Amongst other benefits, participants reported that MOI helped them gain confidence in their abilities, provided them with a sense of pride and belonging, and helped them become hopeful about the future, all experiences that research has shown enhance young people's resilience (Bond & van Breda, 2018; van Breda, 2015).

Notably, CYCCs did not make MOI available to all the young people in their care. While describing their experiences of MOI, participants were explicit that they had either negotiated with staff, or been selected, to engage in MOI. This demonstrates a persistent gap in the area of preparing young people in care for independent living (Bond, 2018; Refaeli et al., 2013), a gap that is partly due to a lack of policy emphasis on the preparation of young people for life after care (Bond, 2018), coupled with financial and human resources constraints (Agere, 2014; Strydom et al., 2020). The most important finding from this study is perhaps the participants' ability to link some aspect of their current functioning to the MOI they experienced in care. For instance, all participants included in this study felt that what they learned through MOI enabled them to manage responsibilities outside of care, including family and work responsibilities. Participants who were employed or self-employed at the time of data collection attributed their ability to do well to the

MOI that was afforded in care. This is an important finding, as it shows that MOI has the potential to enhance resilient functioning whilst young people are still in care, and to build their capacity to lead meaningful lives outside of care.

As the findings show, while the participants appeared to be doing reasonably well, they still experienced challenges while transitioning from care. This is consistent with resilience literature, which states that resilient functioning is not necessarily concerned with the ability of individuals to avoid adversity, but rather their ability to engage successfully with risks (van Breda, 2018a). Some of the participants experienced financial challenges and struggled to secure employment. However, instead of succumbing to these difficulties, they evidenced an ability to deal well with their challenges. Their outlooks were positive and optimistic: they felt that they could work towards improving their lives. This study, therefore, argues that MOI enables young people to mobilize protective factors (Zabern & Bouteyre, 2018), which helps them cope in the face of risks associated with the transition from care (Mann-Feder & Goyette, 2019).

Participants felt that MOI played a vital role in their lives, providing them with opportunities to learn skills, discover their passions, and interact with people outside of residential care. As Elliot pointed out, “Young people will not live in care forever; therefore, they must have opportunities to practice independence.” Interestingly, all participants expressed that while MOI helped prepare them for life after care, CYCCs nevertheless need to do more to prepare youth for leaving care. This suggests a need for more comprehensive planning in terms of programs aimed at helping young people transition from care to independent living.

Implications and Conclusion

The findings of this study suggest that providing young people with opportunities to practise independence while in care is crucial for building their capacities to deal with the challenging transition from care to independent adulthood. MOI, which provided young people with opportunities to practice independence, appeared to have long-term benefits for young people after leaving care. As expressed by the participants, without such opportunities, young people risk dealing with the challenging transition from care without adequate preparation. As demonstrated in the findings, MOI mobilized resilience resources, which proved crucial during the difficult journey out of care.

However, participants reported that their CYCCs did not formally implement MOI. It also appears that only a select group of young people were afforded MOI, based on negotiations between the CYCWs and young people. Furthermore, while participants reported that CYCWs took steps to protect them from unnecessary risk, CYCWs seem to have done this based on common knowledge about what is considered risky, rather than on formal practice protocols.

It is, therefore, recommended that CYCCs formalize MOI as part of good practice. This would ensure that CYCCs provide explicit guidelines for appropriate opportunities for independence (the OI in MOI) and protocols for assessing and managing possible risks (the M in MOI). Furthermore,

formalizing MOI would ensure that all young people growing up in residential care, and not just a few, will be afforded MOI to equip them for independent functioning. Finally, we recommend strengthening aftercare services to serve as a platform to support care-leavers during their transition and as an opportunity to evaluate the effectiveness of MOI, which can help inform practice.

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