Affording managed opportunities for independence to build looked-after young people's resilience: perceptions and experiences of care workers

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Abstract

Purpose – *The purpose of this study is to explore the contribution of what the authors have termed, ''managed opportunities for independence'' (MOI) in building the resilience of young people in care.*

Design/methodology/approach – *The study used a qualitative, grounded theory methodology. Nine child and youth care workers were purposively sampled from various child and youth and care centres in South Africa.*

Findings – *Findings indicate that MOI contribute to the development of resilience of young people in care.*

Originality/value – *Care-leaving literature recognizes that too much protection does not adequately prepare young people for independent living. There is also increasing attention to the resilience processes that enable care-leavers to thrive during the transition from care to independent living. However, there is limited empirical research that looks at how in-care programmes develop young people's resilience. In addition, very little is said about what it means for child and youth care practice. This study's focus on the contribution of ''managed opportunities for independence'' in building the resilience of young people in care provides a foundation for understanding the care-leaving process better.*

Keywords Managed opportunities for independence, Child and youth care, Resilience, Residential care, Care-leaving, Independent living

Paper type Research paper

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Introduction

The topic of youth transitions is gaining increasing attention globally (Arnett, 2015) and in South Africa (Mupaku *et al.*, 2021; Van Breda, 2022). While transitioning youth in general hold interest amongst researchers, those who grow up in alternative care are generally considered more vulnerable to transitional challenges (Armstrong-Heimsoth *et al.*, 2021; Bond, 2018b; Van Breda, 2019). Globally, due to various circumstances, a significant number of young people have grown up in alternative or out-of-home care (UNICEF, 2021).

In South Africa, young people who grow up in care are typically discharged from the system at age 18 (Van Breda *et al.*, 2020). According to Tanur (2012), many South African care-leavers have no family to return to, but if they do, their families are often too poor to meet their needs. This is true for many care-leavers across the African continent, who transition to communities characterised by high levels of poverty, often with insufficient preparation and transitional support (Van Breda and Dickens, 2016; Mhongera and Lombard, 2016; Frimpong-Manso, 2018; Tekele and Kotecho, 2020). In such contexts, some degree of

independence and responsibility is required of the care-leaver to facilitate their successful navigation of the transitioning process (Bond, 2018b; Van Breda and Hlungwani, 2019).

Child and youth care workers (CYCWs) play a pivotal role by providing opportunities to young people in care, under their supervision, to be independent and exercise responsibility. We have termed these "managed opportunities for independence" (MOI), based on our reading of the literature and on conversations with care-leaving researchers and practitioners. This paper aims to further explore the concept and practice of MOI. The term "managed" is used to express the recognition that, while being allowed to experience the world first-hand is essential for healthy development; this may also create risk for young people. Thus, a balance is required between, on the one hand, the opportunities for young people to exercise independence as part of growing up, and, on the other, protection from high levels of risk associated with such independence. Such a balance between risk and protection can be argued to constitute good parenting in adolescence (Anglin, 2002).

The "OI" components refer to the actual opportunities for independence afforded to young people. OIs therefore, within the CYCC context, include an array of activities which are seen as important in the young person's journey towards independent adulthood. These include opportunities to learn social skills, learn to function under stressful circumstances, make responsible decisions, earn and manage money, explore the outside community, learn household chores, etc. It is to be noted that young people play an important role in identifying and agreeing to these opportunities for independence, which are supervised by the care workers.

With a recognition that resilience is a process that develops over time (Werner, 2012; Theron, 2019), there is growing attention to factors that promote resilience among children and youth (Van Breda, 2018b). Some key resilience-promoting factors include emotional coping skills, perceived competence and self-reliance (Bond, 2010; Masten, 2014; Sulimani-Aidan and Melkman, 2018), all of which can be achieved through engagement with risks and opportunities in one's social environment (Furey and Harris-Evans, 2021).

Despite this acknowledgement, there is limited research that looks at what CYCWs in residential care do to enhance young people's resilience. Sulimani-Aidan and Melkman (2018) add that youth transitions studies seldom explore the resilience of young people from the point of view of their caregivers. While literature recognises that too much protection inadequately prepares young people for independent living (Ungar, 2007), there is little empirical research on the topic. In addition, little is said about what it means for child and youth care practice.

The purpose of this paper, therefore, is to present CYCWs' experiences and perceptions about affording MOI to young people in residential care. First, we provide an overview of literature that shows how MOI can better prepare young people for life after care. Second, an account of the qualitative methodology used in this study will be described. Third, we present findings on CYCWs' perceptions and experiences of affording young people in care with MOI, focussing on what MOI looks like in care, as well as the short- and long-term benefits of MOI. Finally, we provide a discussion of the findings, as well as implications for care-leaving services.

Literature review

Young people who grow up in care are considered a vulnerable population (UNICEF, 2021). While there are three stages to this vulnerability, namely, pre-care, in-care and post-care (Pessoa *et al.*, 2020; Tregeagle *et al.*, 2019), it is during the third stage that young people must navigate life without the safety net of the alternative care system. In contexts where support systems are limited, care-leavers are expected to navigate independent life on their own (Tanur, 2012; Bond, 2015). MOI, therefore, may be a helpful in-care intervention equipping young people in care for the daunting journey ahead.

While literature consistently points to poor outcomes for care-leavers (Dickens, 2018; Heerde *et al.*, 2018; Hasson *et al.*, 2021), there is also a growing body of research that focuses on the resilience of care-leavers (Frimpong-Manso, 2018; Van Breda and Hlungwani, 2019; Furey and Harris-Evans, 2021). According to Rutter (2012), a person is considered to meet the criteria for resilience if they evidence exposure to adversity as well as positive adaptation. Young people who grow up in care have been exposed to various kinds of adversity, and while some may struggle to adjust, many thrive and achieve better-than-expected outcomes after leaving care (Van Breda, 2018a). It appears then that, while exposure to adversity may have a harmful effect, regulated exposure to low levels of stress may have a sensitising effect, enabling them to respond more adaptively to subsequent adversity, which Rutter (2012) refers to as a "steeling" effect. Thus, MOI, which inherently carry an element of risk, are necessary to facilitate this "steeling".

The residential care setting is generally restrictive in nature (Trout *et al.*, 2010). The South African Children's Act refers to young people who are placed in care as "children in need of care and protection", which implies an emphasis on protection (RSA, 2005). This emphasis on risk prevention, however, paradoxically often results in the neglect of the developmental needs of young people in care (Anglin, 2002). With most looked-after young people having suffered various kinds of abuse or neglect prior to their placement (Roberts *et al.*, 2017), the restrictive nature of the placement can result in further developmental deficits. While the national child care and protection policy (RSA, 2019) mentions the need for comprehensive preparation for independent living, little practical guidance is provided for residential care workers. Instead, like the Children's Act, the policy emphasises protection.

When young people are removed from their original homes and placed in residential care, they are protected against the various forms of harm (e.g. emotional, physical), and the protection continues, perhaps more intensively, while they are in care. For example, a walk to a nearby shop, which is taken for granted by many young people who are raised by their own parents, may require official authorisation for those in residential care. Many question if this intensive protection in fact hinders healthy development and is "too safe for their own good" (Ungar, 2007). If a young person who is raised in care is expected to live independently from the age of 18 (Van Breda *et al.*, 2020), it is important to critically consider the degree of preparation residential settings afford them, while still in care, to function independently.

Frimpong-Manso (2012) notes the importance of preparing young people for life after residential care, which, he adds, should ideally consider the views of young people in care. However, due to the restrictive nature of residential settings, young people who grow up in care are deprived of the opportunity for "freedom, exploration, [and] risk taking", which are critical for preparing for adulthood (Stein, 2006).

Ungar (2007) asserts that to grow emotionally, intellectually and socially, young people need to experience their world first-hand. He adds that young people can benefit from exposure to manageable amounts of risk and responsibility. After all, he argues, young people (in or outside the care system) will eventually have to live independently.

The theory of resilience is widely used in care-leaving research and practice in South Africa (Van Breda, 2018a; Van Breda, 2017). The most recent resilience theorisation, termed multisystemic resilience (Ungar and Theron, 2020), argues that multiple interacting systems around an individual are key for their development. Indeed, many of the resilience studies conducted in Africa highlight the importance of the various resilience resources, including environmental, relational, personal and positive in-care experiences, in facilitating a more successful journey out of care (Van Breda, 2021). MOI, therefore, can provide an opportunity for young people to mobilise these resilience resources while still in care.

Stein (2005) states that children in care usually have low self-efficacy, a key resilience-enhancing factor. According to Masten (2014), self-efficacy is developed by providing

young people with opportunities to experience their environment, which provides them with an opportunity to overcome manageable challenges. Without such opportunities, young people may feel powerless and less likely to thrive in the face of adversity.

According to Stein (2006), improving outcomes for care-leavers requires comprehensive responses, including providing better quality care and opportunities for gradual transitions. However, care-leavers' journeys to independence are often compressed (Stein, 2005). Without MOI, young people who grow up in residential care are expected to move straight from restrictive environments to (unrestrictive) independent adulthood without adequate preparation. This instant adulthood means that they are not afforded the psychosocial opportunities to deal with transitional issues over time (Stein, 2006). As a result, care-leavers, particularly in African contexts where achieving financial independence remains a great challenge, are more likely to find themselves stuck in "waithood" instead of transitioning to adulthood (Honwana, 2014). This study's focus on MOI, therefore, is crucial in understanding what CYCWs do in practice to prepare young people for independent adulthood.

Methodology

Research approach and design

The study adopted a qualitative, exploratory approach (Fouché and De Vos, 2011). An exploratory approach was best suited for the study, as there is limited empirical research that focusses on programmes for preparation from the perspective of care workers, allowing this study to explore new territory. The qualitative approach allowed for the exploration of the social phenomenon of MOI, building a complex, holistic account of participants' experiences and views (Isaacs, 2014). The study was informed by grounded theory design (Charmaz, 2014). Grounded theory's roots in symbolic interactionism allowed for teasing out the interactions of young people with various systems around them, as they practice opportunities for independence, and how CYCWs managed these opportunities.

Population and sampling

The population for this study was all CYCWs in South Africa. Nine participants were selected using purposive sampling, a form of non-probability sampling, to select participants who possessed characteristics that relate to the study (Nicholls, 2009). The primary criteria were that they must have worked in a child and youth care centre (CYCC) for at least three years, during which they must have provided opportunities for independence to a young person in their care. Selection of participants was done with the help of CYCC gatekeepers, who approached CYCWs who were believed to meet the sampling criteria. Names of those who agreed to participate were given to us together with their contact details. Participants were selected from four CYCCs. Five participants were male, while four were female. Years of working experience ranged from 4 to 23 years.

Data collection

Data were collected using one-on-one semi-structured interviews (Greeff, 2011), to gain a detailed account of participants' perceptions and personal experiences about MOI. While an interview schedule was designed to guide the interviews, participants were prompted to take on an "expert" role and decide on the direction the interview (Nicholls, 2009). Interviews lasted 60–90 min. While the initial plan was to conduct face-to-face interviews with all participants, the COVID-19 regulations that were in place during the time of data collection (May–July 2020), necessitated interviews to be conducted online.

Data analysis

Charmaz's (2014) grounded theory method was used to analyse data. After checking the transcripts against the interview recordings, a step-by-step analytic process was conducted. First, line-by-line coding was done by assigning codes to each line of text using gerunds (verbs ending in –ing). This helped to draw attention to participants' actions and interactions. Second, focussed coding was conducted to identify codes that appeared most frequently, while also focussing on those that appeared particularly associated with MOI or the development of resilience of young people. Third, we conducted constant comparison, by identifying recurring codes or themes across transcripts. Finally, themes were checked against the original data, to verify that the themes were grounded on auditable data.

Trustworthiness

Various strategies were used to enhance the study's trustworthiness (Lincoln and Guba, 1985). Credibility was enhanced by persistent engagement with the data to ensure that participants' perceptions of MOI were accurately captured. The rigorous grounded theory method of analysing data also increased the credibility of the study. Confirmability was enhanced by leaving a clear audit trail to allow for the process to be scrutinised. The dependability of the study was enhanced by ensuring that the research process is logical and well documented.

Ethics

Participation was voluntary and all participants were made fully aware of their right to refuse participation. Informed consent letters were signed by all who agreed to participate. Due to the sensitivity of the topic under study, the participant information letter and the consent forms stated that, should a CYCW reveal information that shows that a child in their care was abused, this would have to be reported to ensure the safety and protection of children in care. However, none of the interviews showed evidence of possible abuse of children. To promote confidentiality, transcripts were stripped of all identifying information and participants' real names are not used in this article. A counselling referral system was arranged for participants who needed this. The study was approved by the Faculty of Humanity's Research Ethics Committee at the University of Johannesburg (REC-01–041-2019).

Findings

In this article, we present three key findings that emerged in this study, namely, the practice of MOI within the CYCC context (which has three sub-themes), perceived short-term (in-care) benefits of MOI, and perceived long-term (aftercare) benefits of MOI.

Practice of managed opportunities for independence within the child and youth care centre context

This study reveals that, even though they had never heard the term "MOI" and had not thought about or discussed the idea previously, CYCWs consider affording young people in care opportunities for independence as a crucial part of their work. Like "regular" parents, they consider it their duty not only to provide the care and protection these vulnerable young people need, but also to prepare them for independent adulthood. The CYCWs expressed that the exercise of affording young people MOI was "risky" and therefore required careful planning and sometimes authorisation.

In this article, therefore, attention is given to the participants' description of how the implementation of MOI comprises three elements, namely, the OI, risk assessment and risk management. These are unpacked in the sub-sections below.

Opportunities for independence

OI refers to the actual activities that a young person engages in, which are seen as having potential to build their resilience or prepare them for independent functioning. While the OI afforded to young people varied across CYCCs, the intended benefits appeared to be the same, namely, to equip young people to function in the community. In the following extract, for example, Bongani describes an instance where he sent a group of three young people to the city to visit an employment agency:

> They were asking us like 'Who is taking us there?' because they have this thing in their mind that when they have to go somewhere, you have to drive them and drop them off and fetch them. So, they were very excited when they saw that we gave them the money and told them they had to find out how much money they needed to get to [the city], and we gave them the money to go on their own.

Most of the OI involved teaching the young people basic skills and CYCWs expressed that, usually, young people have things done for them by staff members. Therefore, they considered activities such as house chores to be OI. The following extracts show two examples:

> So, when they are in care, they are taught about different skills, such as taking a good care of themselves, doing house chores, and about good behaviour. These are some of the things that will help them survive when they leave (Dineo).

> You wash your clothes and your socks, and whatever clothes you have are yours now. [...] Everything is under supervision, but you are on your own, because at the age of 14 you teach a child independence, so you have to cover everything (Ike).

Some CYCWs adopted a more formal approach in their OI activities. For example, Bongani talked of a checklist that was used to keep track of a young person's level of independence and to determine readiness to function independently:

> The checklist that I was talking about, for example, they must be able to say, I know how to use an email, I can go to a public shop to get something on my own, I can cook [...] So we also have a programme where they learn how to prepare meals and they come with a budget and decide what they want to buy and what they want to cook, and they feed other young people. And we also teach them about hygiene, where we have people who work with them 24/7 like in the dormitory to look at[...] can the young person make a bed when they wake up.

Dineo adopts a progressive approach by monitoring competency on particular tasks and then exposing a young person to more complex tasks:

> I started giving them a computer to do their own research, because we used to do the research for them. So now I was guiding them. Here is the computer. But now as they grow older, and I see how independent the child can be if she is given an opportunity. Going to the internet café and now it is outside of the premises and there is no one that is going to be saying, 'No, you are doing it wrong'. She is on her own and she goes there, and she does it on her own and she comes back with the printouts. That is how I started monitoring such small things.

In addition to what could be regarded as basic OI, like those described above, there also appears to be a focus on providing OI that assist young people to learn not only to survive in the community, but also to realise their potential and discover their individual skills and talents, which can potentially improve their employment prospects. This is captured by the following excerpts:

So, I had these two boys who used to ask that they wanted to do the garden, they wanted to wash cars; they told me they are used to working with their hands. So, what I used to do with them, depending on whether my colleagues agreed, I would help them grow things like spinach in the garden, which they sold to the staff members. They would also wash staff members' cars. They would save their money until such time when they needed it for something, and it would be given to them (Ike).

Remember that when they start [plaiting hair] they are not perfect, so the more you do it the more perfect you will become. So, when she became perfect, then the social workers tried to connect her with the outside hair salon (Julia).

In South Africa, where youth unemployment continues to rise (StatsSa, 2021), leaving care being equipped with skills that can enable a young person to compete in the job market can make a huge difference in the life of a care-leaver, whose vulnerability to unemployment is even more pronounced compared to young people who grew up at home.

Risk assessment

Risk assessment entails the CYCWs' consideration of what might go wrong during the OI. The OI were evidently carefully thought through, often within a multidisciplinary context, to minimise possible risks. This was also done in consideration of the statutory regulations. The following extract demonstrates this:

"The important thing is knowing the numbers. How many do you have in your care? How many risks you have? And if you take about 10 young people, then you have 10 risks on your hands. Number one, who takes chronic medication? You have to have information on those things. Their ages, their height and then obviously again you still have to travel. So, the preparation, you cannot do this alone as a child and youth care worker and you need to consult. You need to consult your colleagues and find more information. So, if you plan to take children alone, you need to have input of everybody, because some might say you cannot take this child because of these reasons from the court" (Fumani).

Despite contemplating the risks, CYCWs held that the possible benefits of OI outweighed the risks. As stated by Anglin (2002), emphasising risk may result in the neglect of the developmental needs of young people in care, which in itself is a risk to healthy development. Carol's view of risk demonstrates this idea clearly:

The risk that was created was for him to take opportunities when they present themselves. Not to look down on himself and say I am from the institution always going back, you know. Look how he took a risk and became part of that [city] committee. He was part of it, and he was participating, and he was nominated as their chairperson. So, the risk was to put himself out there and saying, 'Here I am. This is what I have got.' But they became positive risks for him, where he was able to find his abilities as well as his talents.

Risk management

Risk management involves the CYCWs' planning and actions to minimise risk. Whether children were doing in-house activities or going out of the institution to explore the outside world, CYCWs reported that the one way they could ensure that the young people were not exposed to great amounts of danger, was by providing guidance or supervising the young people's efforts, as Dineo relates:

So, I went with her to the taxi rank, just to make sure that she does not jump in the wrong taxi. I stood behind her and she asked if it goes to that area. And then the child asked the passenger that was there in the taxi, 'Does it go to extension what-what?' She had the money and then off she went. I called her father to check if she arrived and then the father said, 'Yes, she arrived'. Then, from that moment, on the child went by herself.

George used a driving metaphor to demonstrate that, despite possible risks, it is crucial to allow young people to experience these opportunities, to improve their coping capacity:

> We do not need to run away from the risks and wait for something to polish the road, without harms and potholes. If we have a road without harm and potholes, this person will not learn. If the road that you are going to drive through has potholes and it has harm, be careful with your speed. When you get to a pothole, just drive slowly so that you can be safe, because there might be a situation where you could get a puncture. However, when you give them the kind of information, let them drive! You let them know, in life there are such people and in life there are such things.

Participants felt that it was crucial to allow young people to make independent decisions. While they emphasised the management of risk, they also acknowledged that this would not necessarily create risk-free situations, as young people are seen as human beings who can make choices despite what they are told, as described by the following participants:

> Remember that even though you can teach them what to do, but when they are on their own, they do whatever comes into their minds and that is the difficult part, because we have played our part, but then the child can do something different (Julia).

> Care workers should just learn that we are there just to minimise. Things will happen, but we are there to minimise (Ike).

> Do not take them away from the information, because they learn from the material, and they learn from other things. Then give them options, because at the end of the day, they need to make choices and you will not make the choices for them (George).

Perceived short-term (in-care) benefits of managed opportunities for independence

Frimpong-Manso (2012) asserts that preparation for leaving requires the collaboration of practitioners and young people in care. However, this area of preparation often does not receive sufficient attention in practice (Mamelani, 2013). The CYCWs were positive about how MOI were helpful to young people while still in care, contributing to empowerment, confidence and belonging:

> They felt empowered. And they also had a conversation with outside youth who are living in normal homes [...] Even to go on their own, they were now saying, 'Even at the school we can now go on our own', so I think they were very empowered (Bongani).

> After that, I have noticed that she had more confidence. She was confident and when she would initiate something, she would come up with the plan that she wants to do this (Dineo).

> So, he gained confidence I would say. Confidence! He gained resilience because he was able to start and finish the programme (Carol).

> He felt belonging. He belonged as part of everybody. The boy gained leadership skills. Independently, the boy had self-esteem (George).

The passages above describe some resilience-enabling factors that have potential to be developed while the young people are still in care. And as demonstrated in the excerpt below, MOI offer young people an opportunity to reflect on their efforts and identify points for improvement, thereby developing their self-concept while they are still in care:

> An opportunity to say, 'I think here I am not good, but if I can try it, I can master it' (Nhlanhla).

When a young person is admitted into a CYCC, there is focus on conducting a detailed assessment of the child, which becomes useful in informing the Individual Development Plan. With assessment being an ongoing process, MOI also assist care workers to assess

what a child can do, provide appropriate MOI, and continually identify areas to develop the child. As indicated by Carol below, in the absence of MOI, care workers would find it difficult to match opportunities with a child's potential:

> How will we know if this child has potential if they are not given such opportunities and exercise them? What will they do after care, when they are out of care, if they do not have these skills and even challenges?

In the following extract, Nhlanhla talks about the benefit of having young people in care participate in programmes where they can interact with young people from communities. In these kinds of programmes, young people learn to generalise failure, which helps them view failure and adversity differently, and this helps them learn to cope better with adversity:

> They have a lot in common. Not to say that their strengths and weaknesses are the same. But the children can learn that, 'I thought maybe that I am weak, but when you see a privileged child failing it means I can do better also somewhere.' So, we want to see how you react to that kind of life. That is how it is in societies.

It appears therefore that MOI create a space where young people in care can experience gradual transitions, within the safety net of the care system.

Perceived long-term (aftercare) benefits of managed opportunities for independence

The reality of many vulnerable South African children is that they are removed from a risky environment to the safety of the CYCC, while very little gets done to change the situation in the environment from which they were removed and to which they will return (Tanur, 2012). It becomes even more detrimental if the CYCC does little to prepare the young person to function in the environment that was considered unsafe for them at the time of their removal. In the following extract, Ike clearly articulates this view when asked about affording MOI to young people in care:

> That is the main one. Without doing that, what is the use of coming here? Actually, I am taking you and I am putting you in a box for 20 years and then I am bringing you back to that same environment without assisting you. Then you will still be the same, but now you are not strong enough to deal with those issues. Because we are preparing you to go back to that environment, but now you know different things and you will deal with that society in the right approach.

When asked about how useful OI were, Carol said:

> So, giving the children in care opportunities to be independent is very important because they need to survive and contribute to the world with their talents and abilities. So, whatever we are teaching them, showing them and guiding them, they have to take it out there. So, if we do not create these opportunities for them to exercise what we have taught them, then it is like we are working backwards. After we have equipped them with these skills, they need to go out there and practice that. I mean, even the kids that are not in the institution, are they not learning?

In the following passage, Bongani pays attention to the importance of social skills, by considering how MOI can contribute towards helping young people learn how to conduct themselves in social and networking situations:

> Like I said, these young people, they are going back to their families or their foster care; to their normal environment when they turn 18 or 19, like when they are in school or living with family. So, these young people must be able to live on their own. And with the idea of independence, it gives them an opportunity to learn to get help from other people, not rely only on [the CYCC] and their families. Maybe I can call it 'interdependent'. And even look for a job.

In contexts such as South Africa, where informal networks are often the only source through which care-leavers can access support, it would be detrimental to have such networks

compromised due to the care-leaver's inability to contribute positively to everyday tasks, which form part of MOI in care. In the following extract, Bongani talks about how their preparation for leaving care programme was informed by reports from families of care-leavers:

> When they go back home, we get feedback from family members and they would complain, 'This person wakes up and leaves the house, doesn't wash dishes, doesn't make their bed'. And they would even show us their bedrooms; it's messy. So those are the things they can learn while they are still in care. And if we do not teach them these things, it becomes a habit and people start complaining, calling them names: they are lazy, they are that[…] and that starts destroying that relationship that the young person has with their family or foster family.

In those rare instances where aftercare services are provided (even if informally), CYCWs are able to observe just how far MOI can contribute towards ensuring that care-leavers do not just survive but thrive in communities where even youth in the general population struggle to secure employment opportunities. In the following extract, for example, Carol reflected on how MOI contributed towards helping one male care-leaver do well for himself in employment, an area where many care-leavers are reported to struggle (Ibrahim and Howe, 2011; Van Breda and Dickens, 2015):

> The opportunity [to take part in the President's Award programme, a life skills programme for young people] was very useful for him. Going through the programme has developed him holistically. Remember, he did community service. And also, he is looking for new opportunities, because it took himself out from being an administrator and got into other company levels or departments. So, he is doing quite well. I would say that he is safe for a very long time, wherever he is.

The social environment appears to be central to the topic MOI. In their discussion about why they felt it was important to afford young people in care MOI, all participants said that the young people were eventually going to leave care and return to their communities. They thus considered it crucial for in-care programmes to be geared towards ensuring that young people are prepared to function in their natural environment: the community. This is illustrated in the following quote:

> Remember that the community is a different environment than being in care. When the children go out in the community, they do not know where to start, because they are used to me doing everything for them or showing them all the corners. The children in the community are structured differently from the children that are in care, especially if the child is in care and that child has never practiced independence while they are still in care (Dineo).

As demonstrated in the following extract, there appears to be an acknowledgement that observing the long-term benefits of MOI might be a challenge, perhaps due to CYCWs' recognition that aftercare services are limited. Despite this, CYCWs seemed to believe that their efforts were not in vain, and that young people would, at some point in future, draw from the lessons gained in care:

> It is like you are unearthing something and you have exposed it and you made him to believe in himself more […] Some things you cannot measure to say, this is how far the child has learned, because you can teach that child and that child will internalise that information. But what is important is how that child in future will utilise that information (George).

Limitations

The small sample size limits the generalisability of the findings, but the use of four CYCCs provides a degree of transferability to other sites and the sample is sufficient in a qualitative study to map out the MOI terrain. It is possible that participants chose not to disclose MOI that went badly, to protect themselves from possible disciplinary action, despite the contract for confidentiality. This study relies entirely on the views of CYCWs, which may

present a biased view on MOI. Interviews with CYCC managers, policy makers and legislators and children in care and care-leavers would help to round out a more comprehensive picture of MOI.

Discussion

Care-leaving research consistently points to poor outcomes for care-leavers (Hasson *et al.*, 2021; Heerde *et al.*, 2018; Dickens and Marx, 2018), which can, at least in part, be attributed to poor preparation (Bond, 2018b; Frimpong-Manso, 2012). While there is evidence to show that there are processes that can enhance the resilience of care-leavers during their journey to independent adulthood (Van Breda, 2015; Hlungwani and Breda, 2020), there remains a gap in research that looks at what is done to build the resilience of young people while they are still in care. This study reveals that despite the restrictive nature of the residential care setting and the gaps in preparation for leaving care, some CYCWs engage in efforts to work towards preparing young people for life after care by affording them MOI.

Participants in this study articulated a common belief that MOI are crucial for preparing young people for independent living. While literature points to the need to prepare young people for independent functioning (Frimpong-Manso, 2012), there is little specific guidance on how this should be done. MOI therefore offers a useful contribution as it describes some important components for approaching the task of preparation. As the professionals who spend the most time with the young people in care, CYCWs seemed to evidence a sense of "parental" responsibility, by ensuring that young people are equipped to function independently after disengaging from the care system, an area that is reported as lacking. In accordance with the care system's emphasis on protection and risk avoidance, the participants in this study endeavoured to carefully plan, assess and employ strategies to ensure that young people were protected against harm, while engaging in MOI.

Notably, affording MOI did not appear to be part of a formal in-care programme. Only one out of the four participating CYCCs reported having a formal preparation for leaving care programme. In other CYCCs, it appeared that individual CYCWs took it upon themselves to identify opportunities that could potentially benefit the young people in their care. This required an even more careful assessment and management of risk to protect both the young people and CYCW, who "risked" not only exposing the young people to risk, but also their job. It is therefore evident that the area of preparation for leaving requires greater attention (Frimpong-Manso, 2012; Bond, 2018a).

Despite MOI being a potentially risky exercise, the CYCWs expressed that running away from this risk would create an even greater risk of sending young people back to a life they were never exposed to. CYCWs expressed that it was important to strike a balance between risk and protection, instead of completely shielding young people from risks (Anglin, 2002; Ungar, 2007). MOI can thus be viewed as contributing to building protective factors, which work on the opposite side of risk, to enhance adaptation and thriving in the face of adversity. To reduce risk of harm, CYCWs reported that they supervised MOI, engaged in MOI together with the young people and ensured that the MOI were age appropriate. Even while attempting to protect, a general understanding amongst the CYCWs was that the opportunities given should enhance the young person's confidence, sense of belonging, self-reliance and social skills. These were observable as short-term benefits of MOI, but also as resilience-building processes (Frimpong-Manso, 2018). As argued in resilience literature, it is not the individual's ability to avoid risk that determines resilient outcomes, but rather, their ability to successfully engage with the risk (Rutter, 2012; Van Breda, 2018a).

The short-term benefits of MOI were viewed by CYCWs as the basis on which the ongoing exercise of providing MOI could be founded. That is, by observing the effects of MOI,

CYCWs were able to identify appropriate opportunities for different young people. The short-term benefits of MOI, therefore, are perceived as not only serving the developmental needs of the young people while in care, but also as tools for assessing developmental needs of specific children. With a consideration that resilience is a process that develops over time (Van Breda, 2018a), and within the context of social interaction, it can be argued that MOI serve as a channel through which resilience-enhancing factors can be affirmed.

Implications and conclusion

This study shows that, from the perspective of CYCWs, providing looked-after young people with real-world opportunities to exercise independence, even with some elements of risk, is an important part of preparing them for life after care, which is replete with risk. In the highly risk-avoidant context of alternative care, this is a novel and important finding. Drawing on resilience theory, the study also shows how MOI build resilience, through the exercise of independence within a context of managed care.

Findings from CYCWs also reveal that young people were not exposed to unreasonable risk while engaging in MOI. Instead of shielding young people from risks, the interviewed CYCWs endeavoured to strike a balance between protection on the one hand, which is undoubtedly crucial in the life of young people who have endured significant amounts of adversity, and risk on the other hand, which is seen as pivotal in facilitating healthy development. While there was an expressed confidence in the effectiveness of MOI in building the resilience of young people while in care, participants were also explicit that without a formal aftercare system, observing the long-term benefits of MOI was a challenge.

It is therefore recommended that the CYC system intentionally develops policies and procedures that focus on affording young people MOI that emphasise the M (managed) component of MOI, as part of preparation for leaving care. This will ensure that providing MOI does not become the sole responsibility and burden of individual CYCCs or CYCWs who take it upon themselves to identify and provide MOI to young people in their care. The assessment and management of risk is a crucial component in the practice of MOI. The CYCWs referred mainly to the assessment of physical risk, with emotional and psychological harm mentioned in only a few instances. It is recommended, therefore, that a model of risk assessment be constructed that considers various types of risks, to guide CYCWs as they engage in MOI.

It is further recommended that the CYC system invest in the provision of formal aftercare services. This will not only assist care-leavers access support as they navigate the challenging journey towards independent adulthood, but also create opportunities for CYCWs to observe how MOI contribute to the resilience of young people after leaving care. Together, these would result in a CYC system that provides a holistic and forward-looking service that has long-term benefits to care-leavers.

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