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### YOUNG PEOPLE'S EXPERIENCES OF HOW MANAGED OPPORTUNITIES FOR INDEPENDENCE CONTRIBUTE TO BUILDING RESILIENCE AND PREPARATION FOR LEAVING CARE

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#### ABSTRACT

Young people growing up in residential care often transition to independent young adulthood without adequate preparation, which increases their vulnerability to poor outcomes. Recognition that some care-leavers achieve better-than-expected outcomes has raised interest in care-leavers' resilience processes. However, research on how their resilience is built in care is limited. Similarly, there remains a research gap on the preparation for leaving care practices from the perspective of young people in care. This article explores the contribution of managed opportunities for independence to building young people's resilience and preparing them for life after care. Eleven young people were purposively sampled from child and youth care centres in South Africa. The study employed a qualitative, explorative approach, informed by a grounded theory design. Semi-structured interviews were analysed following a constructivist grounded theory method. Findings reveal that managed opportunities for independence contribute positively towards the preparation for leaving care through the acquisition of independent living skills, mentally preparing individuals to leave care and building their resilience. Young people's perceptions of related risks and gaps are also explored. The study concludes that strengthening practices in preparation for leaving care, such as managed opportunities for independence, is crucial for building resilience and improving leaving care outcomes.

**Keywords:** care-leavers; independent young adulthood; leaving care preparation; managed opportunities for independence; residential care; resilience

## INTRODUCTION

Globally, a significant number of vulnerable children grow up in alternative forms of care (Jianu et al., 2022; Segal, 2023). Childcare policies and legislation recognise the right of children who grow up in care to access a safe and healthy environment (Harder & Wilder, 2021; Leviner, 2019), with access to programmes aimed at promoting healthy development as well as addressing past traumas. However, implementation is often influenced by contextual challenges, with some welfare contexts often lagging in implementing crucial child protection services (Foussiakda & Kasherwa, 2020; Jabeen & Jabeen, 2018).

South Africa has adopted some of the most impressive legislation and approaches related to the care and protection of children (Strydom et al., 2020; Triegaardt & Taylor, 2018), with an emphasis on children's right to access social development programmes that are responsive to their needs (Patel, 2015). Such rights are interpreted in the Children's Act (Republic of South Africa [RSA], 2006) as well as the National Childcare and Protection Policy (RSA, 2019), and are implemented in a range of multidisciplinary practice settings, including in residential care, facilities also known as child and youth care centres (CYCCs).

The need to prepare young people for life after care is consistently noted in the care-leaving literature (Bond, 2020; Shaw et al., 2020), which emphasises the need to develop young people's skills, self-reliance and autonomy (García-Alba et al., 2023; Harder et al., 2020). Studies also suggest that adequate preparation for independent functioning is crucial for fostering resilience during the transition out of care (Burgund & Hrcic, 2021). The childcare system, however, tends to prioritise the protection of children from risk (Schiller et al., 2023), while insufficiently catering to the preparation needs of the young people in care (Gwenzi, 2018; Häggman-Laitila et al., 2018). Consequently, the transition from care into independent adulthood is often a challenging experience, exacerbated by lack of support and access to resources (Sulimani-Aidan, 2020).

Care-leaving research acknowledges that developing young people's resilience increases the likelihood of successful transition out of care (Frimpong-Manso, 2018). Thus, there is increasing interest in the resilience journeys of care-leavers to understand how some care-leavers achieve better-than-expected outcomes in adulthood despite growing up in contexts of adversity (Fisher et al., 2023; Häggman-Laitila et al., 2018). In resource-constrained contexts such as South Africa (Loynes, 2016), understanding the resilience of young people who have experienced care is useful, as it draws attention to resilience-promoting factors that can be enhanced to facilitate a more successful transition from care (Van Breda, 2016).

While studies have explored factors that promote resilient functioning during the journey out of care (Hlungwani & Van Breda, 2020), they have focused mainly on young people's experiences after leaving care. With an acknowledgement that promoting resilient functioning requires a long-term investment in helping young people mobilise a range of resilience resources (Schofield et al., 2017; Webb et al., 2017), there is a need to explore practices that can enhance young people's resilience while they are still in care.

This article explores the concept of managed opportunities for independence (MOI), which refers to opportunities afforded to young people in care by their caregivers to practise independence and exercise responsibility as a way to develop their resilience and prepare them for life after care. MOI is not a formally recognised concept in residential care practice, but rather a practice concept that was developed based on conversations with practitioners and researchers on the process of care-leaving. Opportunities for independence (OI) include a variety of activities that young people in care are exposed to, which are seen as gradually building their capacity to function independently outside of the care system. These opportunities may include performing daily living tasks, opportunities to practise social skills and opportunities to explore their talents, amongst others. The inclusion of the “managed” component (M in MOI) expresses the idea that while affording opportunities to practice independence is crucial for optimal development, it is important for caregivers to assess and manage the associated physical and psychological risks (Hlungwani & van Breda, 2022). The gaps identified in the area of preparation for leaving residential care (Bond, 2020; Van Breda et al., 2022) motivates an exploration of this important topic to learn more about the in-care practices that contribute to the preparation of young people for the transition out of care, which can inform the development of practice guidelines through continued work on the topic.

This article, therefore, aims to explore the experiences and perceptions of young people living in residential care about MOI and how MOI contributes to their preparation for independent living. Firstly, the concept of MOI is contextualised within care-leaving and resilience theory. Secondly, a qualitative methodology, informed by grounded theory design, is outlined. Thirdly, findings relating to how young people in care experience and perceive MOI are presented. Lastly, discussions and implications for practice are discussed.

## CONTEXTUALISING MOI WITHIN RESILIENCE THEORY

Developing resilience is a multisystemic process, the development of which depends on both the individual and the systems with which they interact (Twum-Antwi et al., 2020). The conceptualisation of resilience as a dynamic and gradual process (Masten et al., 2021; Oulahen et al., 2024) suggests that building or strengthening the resilience of young people in care is possible (Modi & Kalra, 2023), which in turn makes an exploration of how resilience building can be approached and enhanced in care crucial.

Research identifies a number of resilience-enhancing factors, including fostering young people’s sense of control, responsibility and self-efficacy (Frimpong-Manso, 2018; Ungar, 2014). García-Alba et al. (2023) assert that building young people’s resilience requires exposure to real-life experiences to facilitate the development of skills to enable young people to function independently. Developing young people’s social skills and providing opportunities for socialisation are also noted as key resilience-enhancing factors (Frimpong-Manso, 2018). However, resilience scores are reported to be typically lower among those growing up in

residential care compared to those who grew up in less restrictive forms of alternative care (Burgund & Hrnčić, 2021; Hamby et al., 2022).

Transitioning from alternative care to independent young adulthood is a complex process that requires preparation and planning, taking into account the physical and mental dimensions of the process (Munro & Simkiss, 2020). However, consistently noted in the literature is that the transition from care into young adulthood is often a rushed and unplanned process (Palmer et al., 2022), characterised by adjustment challenges (Sulimani-Aidan, 2020). Such challenges are typically more pronounced for those transitioning from residential care because of the setting's inherent limitations in providing comprehensive developmental programmes (Molepo & Delport, 2015; Van der Walt, 2018).

Notwithstanding the challenges associated with transitioning from care and the increased likelihood for care-leavers to achieve poorer outcomes in adulthood (Dickens, 2018; Gwenzi, 2018), there is an acknowledgement that some care-leavers do well during and after the transition (Van Breda & Dickens, 2017). It is, therefore, crucial to learn about the factors that account for these better-than-expected outcomes in some care-leavers, while others with similar risk profiles struggle. As has been argued in the literature, learning about resilience-promoting factors can enable the strengthening and building up of young people's resilience (Ding et al., 2023; Oulahen et al., 2024).

Although the South Africa's Children's Act (RSA, 2006) includes the provision of programmes to assist young people with their transition from residential care, there is limited emphasis on what needs to be done in care to prepare young people for this transition (Bond, 2018). The Child Care and Protection Policy (RSA, 2019) also recognises the need to build young people's resilience and provide transitional programmes. The policy is, however, ambiguous about how this should be approached in practice. Consequently, practitioners are unclear about their role in ensuring planned and effective preparation of young people for leaving care (Mhizha & Nhedzi, 2023).

The dearth of knowledge on residential care practices that target resilience building and preparation for leaving care necessitates focused research in this area. Hlungwani and van Breda (2022) report that some CYCWs provide MOI to young people in their care to build their resilience and prepare them for life after care. While MOI has the potential to build young people's capacity to function outside of the care system, implementing the practice may be a challenge, as it is not recognised as a formal in-care programme.

Bond (2018) argues that the state, in its role as corporate parent, has a responsibility for ensuring optimal care for children in CYCCs. While placement in a CYCC is often considered the least preferred form of alternative care (Gutterswijk et al., 2020), Giraldi et al. (2022) note that there is insufficient evidence to support any claim of the setting's incapacity to provide quality care. They also highlight the need to address policy and practice gaps to ensure positive outcomes and optimal development for children growing up in residential care. Improving practice quality, however, requires investments in staff training to facilitate precise implementation and accurate evaluation

(Matte-Landry & Collin-Vézina, 2022). An exploration of the topic of MOI is therefore crucial as it has the potential to inform the development of guidelines for leaving care and resilience-building practices to prepare young people for leaving.

## METHODOLOGY

### Approach and design

A qualitative, exploratory approach (Hennink et al., 2020) was employed. The body of research on the preparation and resilience of care-leavers has not explored MOI as a concept not preparation for leaving care practice. The lack of empirical research on the topic of MOI makes an exploratory approach best suited to explore the perceptions and experiences of young people in care. The study was informed by a constructivist grounded theory design (Charmaz, 2014). Grounded theory's focus on symbolic interactionism allowed for the in-depth exploration of the young people's experiences of MOI and their views on how MOI contributes to their preparation for leaving care.

### Population and sampling

The population was young people who lived in residential care facilities (CYCCs) in the Gauteng province of South Africa. Purposive sampling, a form of non-probability sampling method (Taherdoost, 2016), was used to select eleven participants from three CYCCs. Criteria for sampling were that participants needed to be between 16 and 21 years of age, had been living in a CYCC for at least two years and had experienced MOI during their time in care. Recruitment was done with the assistance of CYCC managers and CYCWs. While the initial plan was to conduct nine interviews, data saturation was reached after only eleven interviews.

**Table 1: Profile of participants**

Pseudonym	Age	Number of years in care	Education
Ann	19	5	College
Berni	19	5	College
Cate	19	9	Grade 11
Danisa	17	11	Grade 11
Ernest	18	6	Grade 11
Frans	20	4	Grade 12
Gloria	17	6	Grade 12
Hasani	20	6	College
Ingrid	17	5	Grade 11
Jack	18	7	Grade 10
Kulani	21	5	College

As shown in Table 1, the age of the participants ranged from 17 to 21. South Africa's Children's Act allows for children to remain in care until the age of 21 if they are still undergoing an education (RSA, 2006), hence some of the participants are over the age of 18 but still in care. The number of years lived in care ranged from 4 to 11. The researcher's decision to include participants who were 16 years and older and who had lived in the CYCC for two years or more was based on the assumption that they would have been old enough to have been afforded MOI in care and thus able to engage meaningfully on the topic. All participants were receiving an education, with the majority in secondary education, while four were in college.

### **Data collection**

Data were collected using semi-structured interviews (Adeoye-Olatunde & Olenik, 2021). While interview questions were predetermined, in line with the study's aim and objectives, they were phrased in an open-ended manner, allowing participants the freedom to share their experiences their own way. Data collection took place between June and August 2023. All interviews were conducted in person and lasted between 60 and 90 minutes. Consent was sought to audio-record interviews and transcription was done by the author before analysis.

### **Data analysis**

Data were analysed using Charmaz's (2014) grounded theory method of analysis. First, transcripts were checked against the original recordings to check for accuracy and completeness. Second, line-by-line coding was undertaken to assign codes that provided meaning to participants' text, using gerunds (word ending with -ing) to emphasise participants' actions. Third, focused coding was done to highlight codes that appeared most frequently and that are in line with the study's objectives. Fourth, constant comparison was conducted to identify and refine codes that appeared across transcripts, which led to the identification of broader themes. Lastly, themes were checked against initial codes to ensure that they were grounded in data.

### **Trustworthiness**

Trustworthiness was ensured throughout the research process (Adler, 2022). The study's credibility was promoted by persistent engagement with the data to ensure that findings were grounded in data. Employing the step-by-step grounded theory approach to analyse data also enhanced credibility. To promote the confirmability of the study, a logical research process was followed, allowing for the study to be replicated in other settings. The dependability of the study was enhanced through careful and detailed documenting of the research process, thus leaving a clear audit trail. The study was conducted with participants who grew up in CYCCs in the Gauteng province, which might limit the transferability of the findings. However, Gauteng province is the most populous and culturally diverse of South Africa's nine provinces (StatsSA, 2022). In addition, CYCCs all work under the same standards and regulations (RSA, 2019). Therefore, findings from this study may be useful in other settings.

## Ethics

The study received ethical clearance from the Faculty of Humanity's Research Ethics Committee at the University of Johannesburg (REC-01-041-2019). Participants were informed about their right to voluntary participation. Participants were young people who were living in CYCCs, and it was important to inform them that participating in the study should be their own decision and not that of their caregivers. All participants signed informed consent forms prior to participating in the interviews. Care-giver consent forms were also signed by assigned caregivers in residential care facilities, since the young people lived under their care.

Confidentiality was ensured throughout the research process. Because of the nature of the topic, participants were informed beforehand that should they reveal information pointing to possible abuse of children in care, the researcher would have an ethical obligation to follow up on the matter to ensure the safety and protection of children in care. Participants' identifying information was stripped off the transcripts to ensure their anonymity. To guard against the possibility of emotional harm, a counselling referral system was arranged for participants who might need it.

## FINDINGS

The findings reveal several benefits of MOI, namely acquiring independent living skills, being mentally prepared to leave care and building of young people's resilience, suggesting the contribution of MOI in preparing young people for life after care. In addition, participants' perceptions of risks associated with MOI and gaps in preparation for leaving care are discussed.

### Acquiring of independent living skills

Acquiring independent living skills is key to the journey towards independent living (Sulimani-Aidan et al., 2020; Webb et al., 2017). The participants reflected on the various skills they acquired through the MOI they were afforded in care, which included different activities they felt contributed to their ability to function independently.

For example, Gloria described how they were given responsibilities for doing their own chores as they grew older. She also talked about the different cottages where those who were approaching aging out of care were housed together and afforded more opportunities to practice independent living skills:

*They do things for you here, but once you get to the higher cottage, you start to learn to do things for yourself, like on weekends, you cook for yourself, clean, and wash for yourself, because by that time you know that you will leave soon.*

In the following comment, Frans talks about how he learned how to prepare meals in care:

*On Saturdays, they [CYCWs] would put me on kitchen duty, and we had to make beef stew. I didn't know how to do it, but they taught me, and I learned things fast. They took me step-by-step, and I also learned how to grill chicken and make other things.*

In addition to doing chores, young people were also taught how to manage supplies (e.g. buying washing powder) and had to work for their pocket money.

*The older boys and the older girls are given their own washing powder once a month and if it gets finished before month end, it is your own problem. So, you have to figure out how to make it last long. If you run out, you have to wait until end of the month. We also have to work for our pocket money. (Gloria)*

Learning how to earn and manage money appeared important in the young people's definition of independence and some talked about opportunities they were afforded to make some money while in care, which also helped them develop skills to earn money.

For example, Ernest talked about the food garden he was afforded an opportunity to start at the CYCC, which allowed him to make some income, some of which he saved for when he would leave care:

*The staff members sometimes buy the vegetables. The money that I get, I buy more seed. When they buy, I give the money to my teacher [part of the CYCC team], and she writes it down. When it is time to buy seeds, I go with her to buy the seeds and we keep the receipts. Sometimes when I have more money, we buy snacks for everyone who helps in the garden.*

Jack talked about his passion for art and how the CYCC afforded him an opportunity to explore his passion by providing him with a workspace, resources and assisted him to sell the art:

*Last time, I got R800 [about \$40] from what they sold. I save it for when I leave this place. That's when I will be able to use my own money. The social worker taught me how to save the money so that I can use it when I leave this place. I give the money to her, and she writes it down every time so that I can know how much I have. Every time I get more money, she adds to what I already have.*

Opportunities for socialisation and to experience the world first-hand are crucial for building young people's capacity to function independently (Frimpong-Manso, 2018; García-Alba et al., 2023). The different CYCCs adopted a different approach to allowing the young people to spend time outside of the CYCC. For example, one CYCC allowed the young people unsupervised time outside of the CYCC on weekends.

*On weekends, you have a choice to go out or just stay in, but we have a curfew; we must always come back at 6 pm. I usually go to the shops or go to my friends who stay near here. Sometimes we just take a walk if I am going with other girls. (Ingrid)*

The other CYCCs were more restrictive, with young people only allowed to leave the Centre on official outings with the CYCWs, such as camping trips or trips to the mall. It also appeared that participants who attended outside schools were mostly dropped off and picked up. Thus, those who were allowed to use public transportation to go to school or college saw it as a privilege and an opportunity to explore and practice independence.

*Like when I go to the college, they do not take me there by our own transport; I use public transport. And not everyone is allowed that kind of a thing. (Berni).*

As demonstrated in Hasani's comment below, the time spent outside of the CYCC was used as an opportunity to explore the outside world, to identify opportunities and possible relationships:

*I use that two hours before I come back here to do something. So, the opportunity for me is to use the time wisely. I don't want to wait until I am too old to start thinking about what I can build. What I am gaining is that one day when I go out, I am not going to be stressed thinking where can I start. So, when it's time for me to go, I will not be stressed because I am already used to life outside. If you only stay in here and even if you go to the nearest shop you don't even try to take a walk before you come back, when you leave here it is going to be too stressful and you will think, "Eish! Where do I start?" But you if you are already used to some people outside, you will also know how to talk with people and ask for help if you need it. You must be a person of the community.*

Families and communities have always recognised the value of preparing young people for responsible citizenship, and in many traditional communities young people are provided with opportunities to practice independent and responsible adulthood by providing them with opportunities to contribute to doing daily family and community tasks (Makiwane et al., 2017). The restrictive nature of the residential care system, however, prioritises risk prevention (Schiller et al., 2023) and devoted limited attention on preparing young people for responsible adulthood (Bond, 2020). The acquiring of independent living skills through MOI while in care, therefore, has the potential to contribute to a smooth and adaptive transition out of care.

### **Mentally preparing to leave care**

The journey out of care is often described as 'instant' (Palmer et al., 2022), resulting in anxieties when a young person is suddenly discharged from the care system and must fend for themselves in a community setting without being adequately prepared for the journey. Evident in the findings is the way that MOI provided an opportunity for the young people to constantly think about the reality of aging out of care, which helps them to prepare mentally for the journey ahead. As argued by (Munro & Simkiss, 2020) preparing young people for the transition from care requires a holistic approach, targeting both the physical and mental aspects of development.

As shown in the following extract, some CYCWs encouraged young people to participate in MOI activities by constantly reminding them that this would help them when they leave care, which helped young people to anticipate leaving care.

*She [CYCW] used to tell us every day that we needed to learn how to cook. She would tell us that the place is not our permanent home and that one day we will leave so we need to know how to look after ourselves, like the cooking and the cleaning. (Danisa)*

Being afforded an opportunity to use public transportation to get to college allowed Kulani to see different places, which he saw as an opportunity to start thinking about his future and where he would prefer to live after leaving care:

*Like when I go to college at Braam [a deprived inner-city community], there are some flats that are not in a good condition. And when I get to go to a place like Houghton [a wealthy suburb], it's like God is asking me which side I want to live in. I have to choose, for me it's like a question and I am being given options: it's either I want to live in Houghton or the other side.*

It appears that the anticipation to leave care, which was stimulated by engaging in MOI, helped the young people think more about life after care, and planned for how they would approach independent living, as shown in Frans' comments:

*What I learned here will help me when I am out there living alone. And when I have a wife and children, I will make sure that they will not suffer. I will make sure that they have something. Even if I do not have a job I will be able to make things work.*

*I learned how to work in a garden here, I can fix things so, I can ask someone to print some advertisements for me and I can put them in the streets for people to know what I do. I can even go to a kota [a form of a bunny chow] shop to ask for a job because I can cook.*

The limited attention to preparation for leaving residential care (Bond, 2020; Mhizha & Nhedzi, 2023) often results in an array of challenges during the transition out of care and contributes to poor outcomes, as observed in areas of employment, education and mental health (Bodiroa & Ross, 2023; Dickens & Marx, 2018). Providing young people with opportunities to practise independence while in care has the potential to improve care-leaving outcomes and allows young people to experience a gradual and smoother transition out of care (Doucet et al., 2022; Oshri et al., 2017).

### **Building of young people's resilience**

As a process, resilience can be developed over time (Ding et al., 2023; Masten et al., 2021) and is facilitated by different factors (Van Breda, 2015). While the benefits of MOI described in the previous sub-themes depict some resilience-enhancing factors, the following examples appear to show vividly the different ways in which MOI facilitated the building of resilience.

For example, Ann talked about how the opportunity she was afforded to go mountain hiking prepared her for the challenges ahead, which supports Rutter's (2012) view that exposure to challenging situations sensitises one to subsequent challenges:

*It [hiking] was very tough for me. It was something that was too big, it was heavy on my shoulders. But as time went by I learned that when I stop, I will remain in one place, but if I keep moving, even if I fall, that's when I will get far. So, I must try and fall and try and fall, but I must not give up. That is what I learned... And I learned that I must experience things; tough*

*things, that I must not only experience easy things in life, but also tough things where I can say, "This is tough, but I am able to do it." Yeah.*

One of the pathways towards resilience is having an adult figure who trusts and believes in the young person (Ungar, 2014). For example, Berni talked about how being allowed to use public transport to go to college, while the other young people in her CYCC were transported by staff to and from school, made her feel trusted:

*I feel like they trust me and believe that I will not do anything stupid. So yeah, I feel that they trust me enough ... I feel like if I was some other child, maybe I would have run away, because here the way some people just don't like to be in this place, even if they are asked to walk to the centre [the other building belonging to the CYCC] to go see their social worker, they would just use that opportunity to run away. Imagine me in a town that is very far from here and I feel like it would be easy for me to run away. So, yeah, I feel like they trust me.*

As demonstrated by Frans' comment below, the sense of pride in feeling trusted by adults can encourage the young people to want to continue doing better and to maintain the trust:

*It makes me feel good because I feel like they trust me. It makes me want to make them trust me more. I get sent out more than the other children.*

Developing meaningful relationships with adult figures can set one on a path to reliability and contribute to the development of life skills (Sulimani-Aidan et al., 2020; Ungar, 2014). CYCWs often have more intimate relationships with the young in people in care compared with other childcare professionals (Chimange & Bond, 2020; Yakhnich, 2022) and MOI provided an opportunity to strengthen this relationship as young people start to see CYCWs as playing a parental role, which can set the young people on their resilience path.

*They [CYCWs] play the role of a mother or teacher; obviously, if you do something wrong they will tell you and they will give you advice on how to handle the situation or how to act in situation. (Ingrid)*

*They are definitely closer to the children than the social workers, because if you need them they will help you with whatever you need; you'd rather go to them than the social workers. (Gloria)*

For some young people, the opportunities for independence provided them not only with independent living skills, but also with a platform to develop and realise their talents. This appears to have facilitated a sense of self-efficacy, which is key for building resilience (Ungar, 2014). For example, Jack developed a passion for cooking and art from the opportunities he was afforded in care, which helped him figure out what he would do after leaving care:

*Cooking is my passion, but I feel that the thing that I am really talented at is art. I am good with art and at school, they told me that I can use my art even with the food. Like how I present my food.*

Ernest talked passionately about working with plants. He also shared that he was planning to start a nursery and a food garden after leaving care. In the following extract, he shares how he developed this passion through the opportunity he was afforded in care:

*The first thing I did was they gave me a spot. No one was working on it, and I had to start from scratch. I remember I had to water the spot for about three weeks so that the soil could get wet before I could dig. I then started digging and put some fertiliser and planted. I think I am the only one who loved gardening here, everyone else just does it because it is part of the chores. For me, it is passion, I do not see it as a chore, I see it as something I will continue to do. Even when I am sad, I just go to the garden, and it helps [me] feel better.*

As the literature suggests, building young people's resilience requires exposure to real life experiences (García-Alba et al., 2023), which facilitates the development of life skills (Sulimani-Aidan et al., 2020) and provides opportunities to build networks (Reuben, 2024). While providing such opportunities is often neglected in residential care, as the setting tends to be risk avoidant (Anglin, 2002) and restrictive in nature (Rauktis et al., 2020), it is argued in the literature that that these opportunities are crucial for optimal development and building young people's resilience (Masten & Narayan, 2012; Ungar, 2007).

### **Perceptions of risks associated with MOI**

While providing young people in care with opportunities to practise independence is crucial, this may in itself create risks to the young person's safety. Indeed, childcare policies tend to emphasise risk avoidance (Anglin, 2002) and devotes limited attention to building their capacity to deal with the challenging transition from residential care (Van Breda et al., 2022). While the participants appreciated the opportunities they were afforded by their care givers to practise independence, they also talked about instances where those opportunities also had potential risks.

For example, Berni, who was allowed to use public transportation to go to college, reflected on an instance when she ran into a potentially risky situation when she travelled back to the CYCC late after a sporting event at the college. As shown below, the incident also had potential for emotional harm as it triggered past negative memories:

*Yoh! I was scared and that place is a bit dangerous and there are boys who would be like "Hey, I like you blah, blah, blah" and I started thinking of something that once happened before I came to live here when I almost got raped... Because in this world you can't trust anyone, like nobody. So even if I would have thought of asking a guy to walk with me I am thinking, "Who can I trust in this world?" No one.*

Gloria felt that while being allowed freedom to spend a few hours outside of the CYCC was useful, she also felt that this was quite risky, particularly for young women:

*Obviously for girls you could get raped or robbed. I don't go out a lot so...I am not saying that I am safe because I go out, but I think if don't go out then I would not be in as much risk.*

Hasani was determined to build his own YouTube channel and said he was allowed to use Wi-Fi at the CYCC to explore a career as a YouTuber. However, he felt that the online space was not friendly and could lead to young people becoming victims of bullying:

*To be honest, to be on YouTube needs someone with thick skin. People will criticise you and say bad things about you. What is important is knowing how to rise when you fall. People will tell you your things are bad, your things are not nice, but there will only be those few people who appreciate what you do.*

As expressed by Kulani below, some young people could misuse their freedom by engaging in activities that could be potentially risky:

*For example, some other kids...I won't mention names, they said they want to go out and party and enjoy because they are still young. And I was like, what if something happens when you are out there enjoying yourself and you die. I am like if you are being influenced by someone, what if that person has something to fall [back] on and you are just a kid from a children's home. I think for kids here, it is important to know what you want. But I think it is important for young people to be taught how to be independent.*

As shown in the following extract, the caregivers took responsibility to ensure that the young people were protected from risks associated with practising independence by supervising and guiding the young people through the activities:

*And there is always someone who is there to monitor us; that is very important. So, they make sure that everything is safe so that I or another person will not get hurt. So, they are always around to make sure that everything is good because if something happens, I think the staff is also going to be in trouble. They will ask them, "Where were you when she was cooking?" So, there is always staff to make sure that everything is okay and show me how to do things. (Ann)*

As demonstrated in the comment below, the management aspect of MOI involved CYCW's careful consideration of risk involved with every activity, with an effort being made to minimise potential risks to the young people.

*I work with tools and sometimes there are chemicals. So, they give me gloves to protect me when I am working with tools. There are two staff members who also work in the garden, and they show me how to protect myself when I am working with chemicals. They observe and make sure they stay close by to make sure we don't hurt ourselves in the garden. And they make sure we have the correct protection stuff when working with tools and chemicals. If the chemicals are dangerous, they do not let us touch it, they are the ones who will use the dangerous chemicals. (Ernest)*

### Perceived gaps in the preparation

The findings reveal that the young people perceived MOI as contributing to their preparedness for leaving care. However, while they are appreciative of the opportunities afforded, they expressed a need for more opportunities to practise their independence.

In the following excerpts, the participants express uncertainty about their ability to look for work on their own, as they feel they have not had enough exposure to job seeking while still living in the CYCC:

*I want to go out there and look for a job myself, without anyone helping me, but I first want to see if I can make it. I want to have that experience first; to experience how a person feels when he or she goes to look for a job. (Ann)*

*I want to know what I need to do to find a job and what kind of stuff I need to say. I heard some people from outside talking about how they are looking for a job; I do not know what specific things I will need to do. (Danisa)*

As expressed in Cate's comment below, the opportunities for independence tended to focus more on learning house chores, resulting in the neglect of other life skills:

*Like, the only practice is with house chores and looking after yourself, but there is not much that we do to practise independence.*

Knowledge on managing money was seen as one of the areas that received too little attention. While some participants reported that they had opportunities to earn money or receive pocket money from the CYCC, they felt that young people were not encouraged or taught how to save money:

*I think learning to save money is quite important, because once you get out there, you will need it. Most of the kids here just use their money to buy sweets and stuff and they do not save any. (Gloria)*

*Well, they do allow you to save the money, but they don't really teach you or force you. It's your choice if you want to take your money and do whatever. For me, I feel like it would be better if I had a bank account, so that I don't always have access to the money. (Ingrid)*

Ingrid added that while they would sometimes have some money to spend, the young people needed to be taught how to approach shopping:

*If they could take us out sometimes, like go to the shops and learn how to shop for groceries and stuff. Most people here don't know how to look at the price when they go to the shop, and they don't know how to go to different shops and compare prices. They just go to the shop and take whatever.*

Most South Africans rely on public transportation with taxis (minibuses) being one of the most common and convenient forms of transportation. Using a taxi requires learning about the unique language, signs and gestures to be able to navigate the taxi system, which can take time to master without sufficient exposure. It is therefore not surprising that participants were anxious about how they would move around after leaving the CYCC:

*Well, I do not know how to use a taxi because I have never used one. When I go to school I get dropped off and picked up and when I go out, I just walk, or my friends send me an Uber. If I leave here with enough money and get an apartment, and if get a job next to where I live, I won't mind not being able to take a taxi because I can use an Uber. But it would be good to learn how to use a taxi. (Gloria)*

As shown in the following comment, learning how to use a taxi was seen as important, and the young people thought of possible ways this could be achieved:

*I think they could teach us how to use a taxi. I did that once with my friend, but I don't really know how to do it on my own. Most of the time we have nothing to do on weekends, maybe the house mother could wait for us at a mall or something and we go there on our own. Or they take us somewhere by transport and let us take a taxi back on our own. (Ingrid)*

Consistent with findings that residential care is typically more restrictive than other forms of alternative care (Rauktis et al., 2020), the participants felt that the CYCCs were quite restrictive and tended to be risk avoidant. Berni expressed frustrations about being not allowed to participate in activities that are not facilitated by the CYCC, even though she is over 18:

*Even if you are interested, it's always about safety and protection. Angithi [isn't] this is a place of safety, so they always want us to be protected. So, there are many things that I learned from the programmes, and I was like I want to do this and want to do that, but I can't. For me, things that they might do, they mustn't be too strict because them being strict could be them pushing away the kids. Some kids run away from this place because is too strict for them. For me, even if we know that the world is dangerous and everything, do you want to tell me that if there was a job opportunity that needed you to go to a dangerous place, would you not go? You would, because right now, unemployment ... you can't just say no to everything.*

As Berni nicely concludes, adulthood is inevitable and without exposure to managed opportunities to practice independence, one is likely to struggle during the transition to adulthood:

*Sooner or later, you are going to have to do things, you are going to have to put food on the table, you are going to have to buy your own groceries. For me, I think they shouldn't be that strict because when they [CYCWs] are this strict, when the kids leave and go out there, they will always think, "Oh no, I was always taught to be careful, it must just be me at the corner, and no one must come near me". That's how I feel.*

## DISCUSSION

The topic of preparation for the transition from alternative care to independent young adulthood is gaining traction in the literature. The consensus in care-leaving research is that preparing young people for the journey of out care increases the likelihood of positive outcomes and resilient functioning in adulthood (Burgund & Hrcic, 2021). While care-leaving studies report inadequate preparation among those leaving alternative care (Bond, 2018; Van Breda et al., 2022), research identifies factors that can promote the optimal development of young people in care, including building self-reliance and a sense of self-efficacy (Frimpong-Manso, 2018), and providing them with opportunities to engage with their environment (García-Alba et al., 2023).

The current study reports on the experiences and perceptions of young people in residential care of how MOI contributes to their preparation for life after care. Although MOI is not yet a formal in-care programme, the findings of this study reveal that some CYCCs afford young people opportunities to practise independence. Consistent with previous research findings, it was found that being afforded opportunities to practise independence, which offer a platform for young people to develop skills and learn to be self-reliant, contributes to young people's readiness for leaving care and building of resilience (Burgund & Hrcic, 2021; Sulimani-Aidan et al., 2020).

As shown in the findings, MOI has several benefits, including acquisition of independent living skills, mentally preparing to leave care and building up young people's resilience. While research should continue to advocate for access to transitional support for young people leaving care, this article argues that building young people's resilience is crucial, as it can compensate for the limitations in access to transitional support, which continue to characterise some welfare contexts (Bond, 2018; Gwenzi, 2018; Strydom et al., 2020).

Perhaps one of the consistently reported factors contributing to the challenges in the transition out of care is the lack of preparation (Mhizha & Nhedzi, 2023; Van Breda et al., 2022), with the journey of care often described as an 'instant' (Palmer et al., 2022). As demonstrated in the findings, engaging in MOI not only developed young people's independent living skills, but also evoked an anticipation of leaving care, which helped them mentally prepare to leave care over time.

The current study shows that the young people also perceived MOI as potentially risky. However, the benefits of MOI appeared to outweigh the potential risks, and the young people expressed a desire to be exposed to more opportunities to practise their independence. Notably, the young people's perception of risks mostly alluded to potential risks, i.e. what could go wrong, rather than what went wrong. Thus, the management of potential risk by caregivers (the M in MOI) is crucial when affording opportunities for practising independence.

While the placement of vulnerable children in residential care is often seen as the last resort as it has limited capacity to facilitate young people's optimal development (Giraldi et al., 2022; Gutterswijk et al., 2020), residential placement is the best option for some young people. As shown

in the participants' demographics, some young people spend a considerable length of time in residential care. Thus, it is vital to consider how residential care practices can be strengthened to ensure the optimal development of this vulnerable population. This article argues that in-care practices such as MOI, which can potentially close the gap in the preparation of leavers, are crucial as they facilitate the mobilisation of resources to enhance resilience that can prove vital in the challenging journey out of care.

## IMPLICATIONS AND CONCLUSION

A range of gaps in practice characterise the South African care-leaving system (Strydom et al., 2020), with a lack of transitional support continuing to aggravate the challenges of care-leaving for those growing up in residential care (Mamelani, 2015; Refaeli, 2020). In such challenging care-leaving contexts, investing in building the capacity of young people to navigate the transition is vital. Care-leaving research notes that adequate preparation for the transition out of care should ideally be gradual (Ferguson, 2018; Gwenzi, 2018), suggesting the need for in-care practices that provide young people with opportunities to practise independence and develop their resilience while they are still within a protective care environment.

Findings from this study suggest that the practice of MOI contributes to the preparation for leaving care of young people who grow up in residential care by providing them with opportunities to practise their independence and exercise responsibility. However, despite similarities in young people's experiences and perceptions of MOI, there appears to be no standard in terms of what is done in the various CYCCs to prepare young people for independent adulthood. The gaps in policy in interpreting how preparation should be approached in practice results in a lack of clarity for those working with young people in residential care (Bond, 2018; Schiller et al., 2023). As demonstrated in the findings, the practice of MOI holds potential for harm to the young people; thus, the developing of MOI practice guidelines would ensure that MOI is afforded in consideration of potential risks, which can be managed in anticipation. The availability of such practice guidelines would also enable appropriate monitoring and evaluation efforts across CYCCs.

It is therefore recommended that practices in preparation for leaving care, such as MOI, be incorporated into formal residential care programmes to ensure that all young people who grow up in residential care are adequately prepared for life after care. Findings of this study reveal gaps in preparation for leaving care. This might be the result of a lack of a mandate on residential care facilities aimed at preparing young for leaving care, suggesting the need to strengthen policy on preparation for leaving care.

While MOI is not a formal in-care programme, findings from this study suggest that the practice of MOI is beneficial for preparing young people for the transition out of care. The need for building young people's resilience and building their capacity to function independently is acknowledged in the literature (Reuben, 2024; Van Breda, 2015). The practice of MOI demonstrates the potential to cater for the resilience building and preparation of young people to leave residential care. Its

incorporation into in-care programme can facilitate a structured and holistic approach to residential care practice, which not only ensures the protection of young people in care, but also equips them with resilience resources to navigate the transition to independent adulthood (García-Alba et al., 2023; Reuben, 2024).

## LIMITATIONS

One of the limitations of the current study is its sample size. While residential care placement is the least preferred option in South Africa, as a result of policy development advocating for children to be placed in community-based alternative care, the study's sample is relatively small to be representative of the population. In addition, MOI is not a recognised residential care practice, so there is no standard approach to the way that MOI is implemented in different CYCCs. While findings reveal similar experiences and perceptions across CYCCs about the contribution of MOI in preparing young people for life after care, the availability of guidelines on how preparation should be approached in practice could have improved data-collection tools. Furthermore, while the findings suggest that MOI contributes to the preparation for leaving care, the participant's views about their readiness for independent living was determined at the point of data collection, while the young people were still living in care. Thus, it is possible that their perceptions may change after disengaging from care.

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