

YOUTH TRANSITIONING OUT OF RESIDENTIAL CARE IN SOUTH AFRICA: TOWARDS *UBUNTU* AND INTERDEPENDENT LIVING

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INTRODUCTION

It is widely acknowledged that the transition to in(ter)dependent living for youth who have grown up in residential care is a traumatising one, especially for those who face socio-economic challenges (Munro, Pinkerton & Mendes, et.al., 2011). There is much empirical evidence that youth transitioning out of residential care are vulnerable, and that they require extensive psycho-social and economic support (Bond, 2018; Dickens, Van Breda & Marx, 2015; Frimpong-Manso, 2012; Tanur, 2012). South Africa's scope for alternative care needs to be acknowledged within its complex socio-political history of colonization and institutionalized apartheid, and a grapping child welfare system (Pinkerton, 2011). The challenges of care-leavers are compounded by widespread poverty, crime, violence and the high number of youth who are not in education, employment or training (Bond, 2018). Foundational legislation such as the South African Children's Act (No 38 of 2005) (Republic of South Africa, 2005) and the National Transformation Framework of the Child and Youth Care Centres (2014-2019) (hereafter referred to as CYCCs) refer to "independent living skills" for youth transitioning out of care, which we argue is an unrealistic expectation.

This qualitative study was designed to understand the perceptions and experiences of youth transitioning out of CYCCs, the present experiences of those who had transitioned out and the perspectives of their caregivers and service providers. This article is based on a sub-set of data analysed from in-depth interviews with 16 youth in the eThekweni region, KwaZulu-Natal (KZN), South Africa. The empirical findings, derived via an inductive approach, highlight three themes, namely: the influences of socio-cultural networks; connecting with family; and the multiple risk factors associated with getting into and out of care, which show that youth's quest for accommodation and security is compromised. We argue that interconnectedness and more resourceful social networks, which resonate with the South African national ethos of *Ubuntu*, as endorsed by prominent scholars such as Van Breda (2018b) and Tanur (2012), are necessary.

***Ubuntu* and interdependency in care-leaving**

Most care-leaving research addresses the experiences of care-leavers preparation for leaving care and/or the outcomes of leaving care (Dixon, 2008; Munson, Stanhope, Small, Atterbury, 2016). Williams (2011) reported that care-leavers become dependent on access to safe accommodation, security, psychosocial support and social work services whilst in residential care. Arnett (2007) contested that an intermediate developmental phase, “emerging adulthood” provides youth between late adolescence to mid-twenties with opportunities for interdependent relationships to address diverse and complex socio-economic and cultural adversities during the passage towards adulthood. Mendes, Johnson & Moslehuddin (2011) argued that youth transitioning out of care lack safety nets since their transition is abrupt, with expectations for accelerated independent living and immediate transition into adulthood. Mhongera & Lombard (2016) concluded, from a qualitative study undertaken in Zimbabwe with 32 adolescent girls who had either transitioned and/or were transitioning out of CYCCs, that due to inadequate and fragmented services the youth were subjected to increased poverty and negative livelihood outcomes.

It is important to consider Avery’s (2010) finding that care-leavers often lacked the maturity required of adults due to their emotional, psychological, educational and behavioural challenges, stemming from unresolved childhood trauma. Similarly, in a qualitative study in India, Dutta (2017) found that adolescent girls lacked supportive and stable family and community networks. The seminal findings of a longitudinal study conducted by Van Breda & Dickens (2017) in South Africa concluded that resilience amongst youth transitioning out of residential care (hereafter referred to as care-leavers) was paramount especially in the face of fewer resources, which characterize countries in the Global South.

Policy makers must consider Furlong & Cartmel’s (2007) assertion that while the challenges that youth face are entrenched in unequal social and economic structures, the search for solutions are in individual deficiencies, which are clearly inappropriate. Stein (2012) noted that the ideal is to support the gradual transitions of care-leaving that provide psychological space for the different stages of transition, common to emerging adulthood. The understanding of the need for supported transitions led to questioning the feasibility of independent living for care-leavers in studies conducted across Germany, Finland and Britain (Cameron et.al, 2018). The importance of interdependence and relational connections to help youth cope with the exigencies of transitioning are reinforced by authors such as Storo (2018) and Sulimani-Aidan & Melkman (2018) in contexts as diverse as Norway and Israel.

The philosophy of *Ubuntu*, with the Zulu maxim, “I am a person through other people” in South Africa depicts the human need for, and existence through, interdependency.

Traditionally, in the African context the extended family, and older persons in the community took primary responsibility for the care of children (Raniga & Simpson, 2010). The allegiance of sharing a surname is associated with African indigenous practices that had a positive influence on some youth to secure accommodation while transitioning out of residential care. Tanur (2012) contested the goal of independent living, arguing that youth interdependency resonates with the philosophy of *Ubuntu*.

Malatjie & Dube (2017) cautioned that many care-leavers in South Africa, who are raised in CYCCs with dominant Western values, are deprived of their cultural and linguistic heritage, which have negative implications for their reintegration into communities. The loss of attention to *Ubuntu* resonates with dominant neoliberal capitalist policies, which fuels self-centredness and material accumulation. This widens the gap between the rich and the poor, with poverty and inequality often being connected to social criteria such as race, class and gender (Sewpaul, 2015a; Raniga & Seepamore, 2017). In the face of uncertain economic times, Van Breda & Dickens (2016) concluded that informal community and extended family supports are necessary resources when care-leaving services by the state are lacking.

Goodkind, Schelbe & Shook (2011) argued that to conceive of “emerging adulthood” as a new life phase, is to reinforce neoliberal thinking of adulthood which equates financial independence with independent decision-making and taking primary responsibility for one’s actions. They call for a redefinition of adulthood as most well-adjusted people are interdependent. This view is endorsed in the new Global Social Work Statement of Ethical Principles (IASSW, 2018, p. 1) which advocates for “a fundamental conceptual shift from situating human dignity primarily within the context of autonomy to recognizing the inter-subjectivity and inter-relatedness of human dignity and human rights.” Such redefinition of adulthood would allow for shifts in service provision that foster connections, social and economic inclusion, and respect for the dignity and rights of care-leavers.

Our central premise is that the Children’s Act 38 of 2005, and the National Transformation Framework of the Child and Youth Care Centres (2014-2019), which sets the expectation for independent living for care-leavers, are inconsistent with the values of interdependency and *Ubuntu*. The latter emphasizes collective caring and solidarity as reflected the South African Constitution and the White Paper on Social Welfare (RSA, 1997). Mugumbathe & Nyanguru (2013) urged social workers to embrace the philosophy of *Ubuntu* and to use its values to assist youth in their transition towards interdependent living – a necessity in contemporary times where dominant neoliberal capitalist values have eroded the ethos of *Ubuntu*.

METHODOLOGY

For the purposes of this study, the qualitative method and the descriptive-interpretive design were appropriate (Taylor, Bogdan & De Vault, 2016). The core purpose of the broader study was to understand the experiences of youth transitioning out of CYCCs, and the perspectives of caregivers and service providers. This article focusses on the experiences of the youth transitioning out of CYCCs.

A CYCC is defined as a facility for provision of residential care to more than six children outside the family environment (Republic of South Africa, 2005). The study was conducted in the eThekweni region, which is the largest municipality in the province of KZN with a population of 3, 442, 360 people (Stats SA, 2017) and is relatively young since 66% are under the age of 35 years. KZN is the second largest province in South Africa with a population of 11.1 million, and is considered one of the poorest provinces with an unemployment rate of 26.7% (Stats SA, 2017). The Department of Social Development, Provincial Annual Report for Citizens, 2016/2017 reveals that there were 4 213 children who were accommodated at 71 registered CYCCs in KZN. This under-represents the number of children in alternative care as a challenge faced by the Provincial Department of Social Development is the mushrooming of unregistered CYCCs.

Probability samples, to produce generalizability, were not possible as a data base for a representative sample of youth transitioning and transitioned out of CYCCs was non-existent. As applicable to qualitative research, a non-probability purposive sampling was employed to recruit youth, as we were interested in the in-depth, nuanced experiences of the youth. The participant inclusion criteria were: being between 17 to 23 years of age; having spent a minimum of two years in care; having transitioned out of care within a two-year period for those who had transitioned out. One of the key challenges encountered during the data collection was the accessibility of youth who had transitioned out of care because service providers did not prioritize regular contact with them.

Ethical considerations included informed consent and permission for audio recording after the participants understood the purpose of the study, their right to withdraw at any point, voluntary participation, use of pseudonyms and that confidentiality and autonomy will be respected throughout the research. The youth were debriefed at the end of the interviews to ensure closure since the issues discussed were sensitive and personal, which in some instances aroused strong emotions, and referrals for follow up services were made where necessary. Ethical approval was obtained from the Research Committee of the University of KwaZulu-Natal with approval ref. no. HSS/0830/0160 in August 2016.

Data were collected via semi-structured, face-to-face interviews. Interviews are more than collecting data, since they involve a way of seeing the world and an opportunity to learn from it (Rubin & Rubin, 2011). An interview guide was used with flexibility to allow the youth to share their stories about how they came into care, preparation for leaving care, plans, dreams, present circumstances, future concerns, main support and help received, and their views on what would make care-leaving easier.

Thematic analysis, the foundation of qualitative research (Braun & Clark, 2006), was used to manage, analyse and report on the data. The narrative data derived from the open-ended questions involved engagement with data from the onset through observation, occasional note taking and attentive listening, followed by repeated listening to the audio-recorded interviews for coding insights whilst transcribing. This ensured familiarity, accuracy and consciously anonymizing sensitive data. Transcription is part of an immersion process whereby data becomes familiar (Braun & Clark, 2006).

Understanding the perspective of others is influenced by one's own biases, values, beliefs and ideologies (Fusch & Ness, 2015). To minimise this we lend voice to the youth with thick description of data, which are interpreted in relation to literature.

FINDINGS AND DISCUSSION

The biographical data of the youth are presented in Table 1, followed by a discussion of three interconnected themes: the influences of socio-cultural networks; connection with family; and multiple risk factors associated with getting into and out of care.

Biographical data

Table 1: Biographical data of the research participants

NAME: AGE	GENDER	RACE	DURATION IN CARE	CARE-LEAVING STATUS		ACCOMMODATION/ PLAN
				Transitioning out (before exiting)	Transitioned (after exiting)	
Sandile: 19	M	Black	11 years	2 months		Half- brother: Bachelor flat
Themba: 18	M	Black	+17 years	13 months		Transitioning home
Rocky: 17	M	Black	14 years			Unknown: host arrangement

				3 months		broke down
Mighty-one: 18	M	Black	11 years	3 months		Host family: common surname
Charlotte: 18	F	Black	14 years	2 months		Host family: parents friend- living on school property
Betty: 18	F	Black	11 years	3 months		Biological family: Informal settlement
Portia: 20	F	Black	11 years	2 months		Transitioning home
Nicola: 19	F	Black	10 years	24 months		Biological family :Informal settlement
Spunky: 19	M	Black	4 & half years		12 months	Transitioning home
Jay: 18	M	Indian	6 years		23 months	Biological family: Township
Naledi: 22	F	Black	6 years		21 months	Host family: suburb -complex
Zinhle: 20	F	Black	5 years		22 months	Transitioning home
Alisha: 19	F	Indian	8 years & 6 months		19 months	Boyfriend-renting outbuilding
Lion: 18	F	Black	13 years		1 month	Unrelated-Host parent-own home
JB Fan: 19	F	Black	+17 years		24 months	Sister-Informal settlement
Shantel: 19	F	Coloured	11 years		3 months	Host family- Township

The biographical details illustrated in Table 1 reflect that there were 10 females and six males who were either in the process of transitioning or had transitioned out of the CYCC. There is an equal representation of 4 males and 4 females transitioning out and a higher representation of females (6) as compared to males (2) who had transitioned out of CYCCs. The youngest participant was 17 years and 6 months and the oldest was 22 years old. All participants had spent over four years in care; 11 i.e. 69% had spent 10 years in care and two (Themba and JB Fan) spent their entire childhood at the CYCC. Three youth (19%) who had transitioned out of the CYCCs were placed in care in their adolescence and the remainder, i.e. 13 (81%) were placed in care when they were 10 years and younger. There

were two Indians, 1 Coloured and 13 Blacks in the sample. This is not unexpected since there is an over-representation of Blacks at CYCCs.

The influence of socio-cultural networks

The youth described their lives as being *“quite a journey”*; *“emotional journey”*; *“like a movie”*. Educators from schools that they attended, and neighbours were often the first to provide support and brought their plight to the attention of social workers. Juxtaposed against their experiences of abandonment, abuse and/or neglect, the youth described getting into CYCCs, which provided them with a sense of belonging and hope, as a positive experience. Sandile said: *“When I came here, I felt free. I felt comfortable. I felt loved, I felt a sense of belonging.”* The youth described the staff and residents of the CYCC as their family and reported receiving resources and protection. In the words of Themba, *“you are safely guarded ... transport is there ... and you don’t even take out money... free shelter.”* While Spunky associated his negative experiences at the CYCC with insufficient food, he too supported the CYCC by mentoring a youth after his transition.

Although all the youth were aware that they had to leave in the year they complete their 18th birthday or highest level of secondary schooling, the abruptness of the loss of their CYCC networks only struck a few months before their transition preparation. The youth spoke of the *“inside”* [CYCCs] as a separate world from the *“outside”* from which they felt protected and sheltered. Although they were school learners and members of faith based organizations, they had little preparation for even basic, daily community living, such as using public transportation, finding their way around, or being able to wake-up on their own. This made them fearful of the *“outside”* and they worried about their safety and wellbeing. Their preparation included advice like *“keep away from others in the community”* to prevent negative influences.

The youth tended to equate success with independence. However, their interpretation of *“independent”* did not exclude receiving support; rather it was the avoidance of dependence. The youth who had transitioned showed the importance of interdependency with host families, and mentors and sponsors playing key roles in securing training, further education, and providing employment opportunities and accommodation. The more connected the significant others were to resourceful networks, the higher the likelihood of support with education and accommodation, rather than the number of significant others.

The value of interdependence and reliance on socio-cultural networks was illustrated by Naledi, a young woman who had transitioned out 21 months ago at the time of the interview, in her book, "*Never have I walked alone.*" She said she had made it this far because of the help she received from people she met along her life's journey. International recognition for interdependence is emerging, supported by the philosophy of *Ubuntu*, as reflected by the IASSW (108, p. 1), which asserts that "Far from being autonomous and independent beings as constructed by liberal theory, as human beings we are all embedded in societies and dependent on their socio-political, economic and cultural structures and conventions." However, this is hindered by legislation in South Africa, which advocates for independent living.

The expectation that youth in extremely vulnerable positions instantly transition to independent living is wholly unrealistic. The youths' desire for "*making a success independently*", which is an official dominant discourse, is tempered by reality. Exemplifying the voices of others, Themba stated "*I don't want to rely on others*", yet his plan was to be accommodated in the organization's transitioning home that would pay for his tertiary education and open a bank account for him to support his transition.

Reliance on others and interdependence, when extricated from their neoliberal connotation of people having to pull themselves up by their own bootstraps with minimal state intervention, are not antithetical with resilience. Van Breda (2018a, p. 8) cogently asserted that, "Relationship-centred resilience aligns well with African *Ubuntu* values, which emphasize social connections as the crucible of personhood."

Some youth had mentors, linked to them by the child and youth care workers (CYCW), who provided emotional support, assistance with schoolwork and secured bursaries for them while they were in care, during transition, and a few continued to help them after transition. Sponsors generally reached out to youth after they had transitioned out. The benefit of sponsors was evident, especially when discontinuity in accommodation prevailed. Spunky, for example, was linked to his sponsor when he was transitioning out of the CYCC. While his sponsor continued to pay for his tertiary education in Public Administration, the Youth Empowerment Scheme (YES) provided accommodation at an alternative transitioning home when the one he was living in closed. They took over Spunky's daily financial support and connected him to a mentor, who was an educator, who had previously transitioned out of the same CYCC. Empirical evidence suggests that mentors can serve to bridge the gap between formal and informal networks, and support vulnerable youth in their transition whilst working with parents and professionals (Stein & Morris, 2009).

All youth expressed the need to “give back” after they transitioned out of care to the CYCC or the community. Alisha said: *“I took some of my stuff and the rest I left so the other children could use it.”* Themba, wanted to be a “motivator” so that his peers understand:

“I was part of this outside world and there were challenges that took me out of the outside world and brought me into a community where things were given to me. But I missed things in the outside world... now you are part of the outside world, you should not take anything for granted, you should appreciate everything.”

He indicated that the “missing parts of family life”, such as birthday parties could be prevented if children were placed nearer to their communities of origin. The youth’s willingness to provide services to others before and after transitioning, is one marker of their resilience and possibly a sign for their need for interdependent relationships. Naledi claimed that mentors should be the youth who transitioned out of the same CYCCs. Spunky was already mentoring a youth at the CYCC after his transition.

The premium placed on professional boundaries contradicts the limitlessness of care in *Ubuntu* as evident from the youth’s experiences with professional service providers. Lion, who used to be lonely and sad, spent weekends with a CYCW who she bonded with. She could not understand why the CYCW was not permitted to accommodate her and arrangements were made for her to live with a previous resident of the CYCC. Within a month of transitioning, Lion moved to reside with her sister, who had absconded from the CYCC, and her boyfriend and baby in an informal settlement. The need for a stable relationship with a trusting adult that validates and affirms children and youth in care, cannot be overstated. That one person can make a world of difference in the life trajectory of the youth who had experienced disturbed attachment relationships on account of earlier experiences of abandonment, neglect and/or abuse. Thus, challenges in forming healthy, trusting relationships, with appropriate flexible boundaries in later life are not unusual. Naledi e.g. said: *“I am the kind of person, that once I let you in my space, I become fond of you. This is regardless of the role you played.”* Naledi was insightful enough to recognize that her feelings of abandonment were illogical when her long standing relationship with the school psychologist, whom she referred to as her “verbal diary”, ended.

Levinas’ (1985) thesis of *being for the Other*, which Sewpaul (2015b) asserts should become a normative ethic in social work, is endorsed by the IASSW’s (2018) Statement of Ethical Principles. Levinas (1985) argued that to be responsible means to make oneself available for service of the *Other* in such a way that one’s own life is intrinsically linked with that of others. The justification for the Self, for Levinas, begins with the *Other*; our responses to the call of the *Other* define ourselves. Some youth preferred to transition to child and youth care

workers (CYCWs), who they had known for most of their lives, and who were their most significant attachment figures. But this was not permitted as it was deemed to transgress professional boundaries, and were against the rules of the CYCCs.

Connecting with family

The time of transition is when the youth generally try to re-connect with their roots and to seek validation of their identities, which is deeply embedded in the need to “*belong to someone*” or “*be cared for by someone*.” Wade (2008) described it as a time for reappraisal when care leavers re-evaluate their relationships, including those with their birth parents and substitute carers to determine their reliability to provide emotional and/or practical support.

Sharing a common clan surname served as a resource for reconnection and for a sense of belonging and identity. Sandile’s contact with his host family, for instance, was undeterred by his transfer to another CYCC since they shared his deceased father’s surname and they assisted him in his search for his paternal family, whilst his accommodation was secured with his half-brother. Zinhle also traced her paternal family through a family who shared her surname, but she chose to remain in the transitioning home to be close to her younger siblings at the CYCC. Mighty-One built relationships with half siblings that he met for the first time at his mother’s funeral a month prior to his transition, but he continued to live with his host parents who he was introduced to on account of a shared surname. While family name holds much currency in the African worldview, *Ubuntu* does transcend racial and ethnic lines. Naledi remained with her host family of another race group that she developed strong bonds with, and who supported her education. She chose this even after she connected with her paternal family.

Generally, youth with a surviving parent expressed a need for their parents to take responsibility “...*the moments when you need your biological parents right now and this is the painful part*”, but as their life experiences showed this often ended in disappointment. Portia and Nicola, tried compensating for inadequate parenting through using both parents as their resources:

“It’s like my mother knows her because she [youth] visited me at home once and she calls my mum “mum” and I visit her dad with her and I call him “dad” and like my mum refers to her as her daughter.”

However, neither Portia nor Nicola found emotional or material support from their parents. Both felt alone and uncertain about their future. Nicola feared that her education would be disrupted by her impoverished family circumstances. Betty, whose family circumstances

were extremely poor, resisted but had to return home when there was no alternative. Portia's father's nomadic lifestyle and alcoholism forced her to remain at the CYCC, and Jay who had transitioned into his parent's care said, "[name of CYCC] takes care of you better than your own parents do."

In an atypical case, the reconnection with an absent father during the transition was a source of support. JB Fan had not seen her father until she was 16 years of age. On reconnecting, he repaired her mother's home and reunited the two siblings. Although the home was next door to a drug dealer, they were happy to have their own place. However, JB Fan was to move for the third time in 25 months – this time to a transitioning home that was close to the institute where she began a hairdressing course, which was organised by her mentor. The desired supportive outcome through connection or reconnection with biological parent/s was anticipated, but often not achieved. When Shantel's residential social worker discovered her absent father, she was hopeful after connecting them, even though Shantel was born of an extra-marital affair that remained undisclosed to his family. But on account of his sporadic, secretive calls, on his terms, Shantel became disillusioned. Non-disclosure of the identity and whereabouts of an absent parent was seen as depriving them of opportunity. Alisha believed that if her father, whom she had never met, knew of her plight he would support her. Unlike Alisha, Spunky was less bothered about having not met his father. He resisted being accommodated by his sister in Eastern Cape after his transition and alleged neglect when he once felt forced to visit her by his social worker. He acknowledged her as caring because "*she phones and sends me money.*" However, he saw his host and sponsor as his significant caregivers. Connections can be mutually reinforcing as Spunky's host parent took him as her "*son*", after her divorce.

The youth are bound by common challenges of transitioning out of care, and the common need for belonging, connectedness and care. Group and community based social work interventions should be implemented which include community education and advocacy initiatives. The uniqueness of each of their situations, and the heterogeneity in the youths' attempts to connect or reconnect with their families, reflect the need for reclaiming *Ubuntu* and individualized carefully managed plans for supported transitions to interdependency.

Getting into and out of care: multiple risk factors

The same risk factors that contribute to children getting into care, contribute to challenges in youth transitioning out of care and into communities. The reasons that the youth in this study came to be in care ranged from 50% being orphaned; 25% abandoned and 25% who were abused and/or neglected. Multiple risk factors included poverty, unemployment, begging,

living on the street, child-headed households, alcoholism, drugs and HIV/AIDs. Unfortunately, for many of them the intervening years saw no improvement in the conditions of their families; indeed in some situations there was clear deterioration in family circumstances, perhaps reflective of the lack of attention to reunification services for families once children are placed in care and to structural poverty which exacerbates the disabling family environment. For Betty, whose family life was characterized by unemployment, poverty and alcoholism, all except Betty were HIV positive. Nicola, who understood poverty to be an underlying factor for their circumstances, experienced guilt as her two younger siblings were with her mother and they often did not have sufficient food and walked long distances to school.

In some situations no provision was made for youth who excelled in care to continue to progress after their transition.

“I thought here I have a ticket for where I want to go then, bang and here I am starting all over again. I don’t have this, I don’t have that. I must work at it whether I like it or not.”

The starting over is evident when the youth have to leave the CYCC. JB Fan had to leave at 18 years, before completing matric. She transitioned to her grandmother in a township, changed schools, struggled with adjustment and with making friends, and lost the opportunity to continue with drama and her over-seas exposure. Lion participated in Special Olympics and was given a leadership role in arranging provincial and national sports. Her coach secured a bursary for her to study engineering at a technical school whilst pursuing her sporting career, but she was uncertain if her unsettling accommodation would affect her progress.

Many youth expressed frustration about limited options and resources, and the sudden expectation that they perform as adults, and devise accommodation plans when they were excluded from decision-making. Portia’s poignantly summed up her situation:

“...I am now doing the adult’s job. I have been here for 11 years ... How am I going to now find something when I have nothing but my books? I have no financial backing, no adult to depend on. I can find a place, but I still need to pay for the place, transport because the bursary will sort out studies, but I have to buy my books and pay the rent and food. What I want to know, when they were sitting down and deciding my future what were their plans because I am having to come up with all the plans.”

Portia's frustration and sense of powerlessness is evident in her talk about "*them*" deciding "*my future*", combined with the incongruous expectation that she be an adult and make her own plans. In some circumstances it is as if, upon the youth approaching 18 years of age, there is a sudden dawning that she/he has to leave and that "something must be done"; with the "something" sometimes becoming the onerous responsibility of the youth, as reflected in the voice of Portia, "*I have to come up with all the plans.*"

None of the youth were ready for independent living and their accommodation was not permanent. In fact, between the first interview and second member check interview, changes in accommodation had already occurred with some youth. Portia was enthusiastic about going to the transitioning home, but a week later heard it was closing down. Simultaneously, four transitioning homes had closed down during the period of the study. Social workers, and more so mentors and sponsors secured alternative accommodation. Three youth had transitioned to their siblings who had also been in care, and who themselves were struggling. Betty, JB Fan and Sandile identified their siblings who had transitioned out before them as their caregivers, while Zihle, Shantel, and Alisha had taken responsibility for their younger siblings at CYCCs. Betty's concern was that their relationship at the CYCC became distanced due to the rigid routine that did not allow much interaction between siblings.

In addition to socio-economic challenges, youth had to contend with stigma, discrimination and taunting by society. Shantel's poor impulse control and aggressive conduct in response to this is evident, "*There was this one boy who accused my mother and you know children from children's homes ... so I stabbed him.*" The youth often do not disclose that they were at CYCCs for fear of judgment. Alisha for example did not disclose to her school, except for one learner and not even to her boyfriend, whom she was living with at the time of the interview, that she was previously accommodated at a CYCC. This is not unique to South Africa. For example, Islam (2016) found stigma attached to birth identity, being in care, and to weak social safety nets in Bangladesh, and called for society to understand care-leavers plight and to take some responsibility, especially in the face of little or no formal and family support.

MAJOR CONCLUSIONS AND RECOMMENDATIONS

This article presents three key interconnected themes which support the findings that interdependent living is required by care-leavers which resonates with the values of *Ubuntu*. The themes are: the influence of socio-cultural networks; connecting with family; and getting into and out of care: multiple risks. The findings validate the argument that the neoliberal

expectation of independent living, as endorsed in current legislation in South Africa is rather unrealistic.

Gauged from the voices of youth, their yearning for the human experience of connectedness was evident but this was only partially met. Whilst none of the youth were prepared for transitioning out of care, the range of factors that pushed children into alternative care were the same that limited their success in transitioning out, and in securing accommodation. In some instances the youth felt forced to transition out to families whose conditions were unchanged or had worsened. The youth's rarefied notions of family, where family existed, and their need for belonging and care were often thwarted as families, that were experiencing deeply entrenched psychosocial and economic challenges, were sometimes unable to take them in or provide for them. This underscores the importance of socio-economic structural interventions, multi-level family preservation services that include planning for family connectedness, and socio-cultural networking to optimize interdependent living.

In some circumstances it is as if, upon the youth approaching 18 years of age, there is a sudden dawning that she/he has to leave and that "something must be done"; with the "something" sometimes becoming the onerous responsibility of the youth, as reflected in the voice of Portia, *"I have to come up with all the plans."* While the Children's Act no 38 of 2005 permits youth to remain in care beyond 18 years of age, the policy and rules of the CYCCs do not always allow this, reflecting anomalies between legislation and practice. All youth were in long term care (with 69% having spent ten years and longer) and saw the CYCC as their "home". Hence, a loss of connectivity and security was experienced when they had to leave care. This was intensified by the "inside" (CYCC) and the "outside" (community) being perceived as two different worlds, and unless an interconnection occurs to merge them the risks of their marginalization and vulnerabilities will continue. This is achievable if the requirement outlined in the Information Guide on the Management of Statutory Services in terms of the Children's Act 38 of 2005 (RSA, 2012) for care plans from the point of entry are practiced, where least restrictive and empowering alternatives to accommodation are secured and, for youth who have to remain and transition out of CYCCs their consistent engagement with community and family is prioritized.

Against great odds, the youth demonstrated resilience, *coping in the face of chronic adversity* (Van Breda, 2018a, p. 5) and survival struggles, with resilience being defined as, "The multilevel processes that systems engage in to obtain better-than-expected outcomes in the face or wake of adversity" (Van Breda, 2018a, p. 4). Although not perfect, and with accommodation remaining precarious for many, the youth did make efforts to connect or

reconnect with family and/or other social networks to facilitate their coping with life on the outside. In the face of huge challenges, mentors and sponsors played important roles in connecting youth to community resources to facilitate their transitions.

It is therefore recommended that the dominant neoliberal discourse and thrust towards independent living, sanctioned by legislation in South Africa, shift towards interdependent living. Funding and resources must be invested in family and community interventions. Strategies at multi-systemic levels that support connectedness and socio-cultural networking that involve the full participation of the youth, their parents and significant others, and that optimize opportunities for *Ubuntu* inspired interdependent living, must be centred in policy and legislation.

Unless policy makers and social workers acknowledge and address the complex intersection of socio-economic realities and building social networks for care-leavers, the quality of life of care-leavers will remain compromised. While literature is replete with discourses on children/youth at risk and dysfunctional families, in the main what is absent are the discourses on risky and dysfunctional societies. Sewpaul (2015b, p. 10) argued that, "Lifting micro levels of analyses and interventions into broader public issues brings social work into the realm of the political." She went on to argue that social work, more than any other profession, holds the potential to function in that "intermediary site where 'life politics' meets Politics with a capital P: where private problems are translated as public issues and public solutions are sought, negotiated and agreed for private troubles" (Bauman, cited in Sewpaul, 2015b, p. 10). Transitioning out of care is as much a political issue as it is a personal one.

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