Evaluating the contribution of formal youth mentoring in promoting the well-being of care-experienced young people: SAYes as a case study

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“Coming from a situation of a very vulnerable young person I feel like the program has definitely impacted my wellbeing in a positive way because it helped me to become a stronger person and also become more independent.”
“Before I didn’t really know what I wanted, but then I realised my interest, I didn’t know what it was until I was helped to identify it.”
## Contents

### Executive Summary
- The characteristics of mentees and the benefits they gain
- Promoting social and economic inclusion for care leavers
- Scalability and programme development

### Background Context
- Leaving care in South Africa
- Social and economic inclusion for care leavers in South Africa
- Formal mentoring for young people leaving care

### Perspectives on the SAYes Transition to Independent Living programme
- Perspectives on how TIL programme aims are achieved
- Enhanced perspective – Access to guidance
- Enhanced social connections – Access to relationships
- Enhanced social capital – Access to social resources
- Perspectives on TIL programme structure
- Time bounded formal mentorship
- Repeated opportunities to participate in the programme
- Young people’s priorities for personal development
- Engagement with TIL programme content

### The characteristics and circumstances of mentees
- Motivated and engaged
- Preparing for the transition out of care
- Living independently after care
- Dislocation from family and community
- Mental health difficulties
- Unresolved citizenship status
- Experiences of community adversity
- Economic disadvantage
- Race and class
- Disability

### Method
- Study design
- Study Participants and Recruitment
- Data collection
- Data analysis
- Ethical considerations

### Conclusion

### Priorities for further research

### References
Executive Summary

This project aimed to explore the potential of formal youth mentoring as an effective, scalable approach to interrupting intergenerational transmission of disadvantage by enabling social and economic inclusion for young people leaving alternative care in South Africa.

We sought the perspectives of those involved in one such formal mentoring programme - the ‘Transition to Independent Living’ formal mentoring programme (TIL) offered by the SAYes Trust to youth transitioning out of the care of Child and Youth Care Centres (CYCC) in Cape Town. We interviewed 35 young people involved in the TIL programme who were preparing to exit or had recently left care. We also interviewed eight Child and Youth Care Centre practitioners (3 social workers and 5 carers) and held two focus groups with a total of 16 SAYes mentors.

This pilot project was a collaboration between Queen’s University Belfast and the Children’s Institute at the University of Cape Town. Taking the SAYes TIL programme as a case study, this preliminary exploration aimed to identify whether and how mentoring might complement the transition support provided by CYCCs, and help interrupt cycles of disadvantage for care-experienced youth in South Africa, laying a foundation for further practice innovation and research.
Through this qualitative approach, we aimed to explore:

- what benefits are achieved for which care-experienced young people under what circumstances?
- in what ways might formal mentoring be effective in challenging disadvantage and promoting social and economic inclusion for care leavers?
- Might formal mentoring be a scalable approach to achieving South Africa’s sustainable development goals with care leavers?

Below we summarise the key messages from our findings and how they help us understand these three research questions. Throughout this report quotations are from mentee participants, all care-experienced youth, unless attributed to carers, social workers (SW) or mentors.

**TIL Mentoring**

The SAYes Trust is a Cape Town based non-governmental charitable organisation. They have developed the Transition to Independent Living (TIL) formal mentoring programme to support youth transitions.

SAYes offers the TIL programme to young people aged 14-25 years old, who are preparing to exit residential care or who are care leavers living independently in the community.

The TIL programme aims to combat inequality by offering mentees guidance, advocacy and support in a time-limited relationship with adult mentors.

Volunteer mentors are recruited, trained and matched with young people by SAYes staff who also support and guide the mentorship. Mentoring involves paired sessions for one hour per week over nine months.

Mentees work with their mentors towards setting, achieving and reviewing personal development goals in 10 key domains aimed at promoting their independence and well-being.

https://sayesmentoring.org/

**The characteristics of mentees and the benefits they gain**

- All of the mentees we spoke to described a range of benefits from their participation in the TIL programme, especially when they invested time, energy and commitment. Young people who are motivated, have the capacity to engage in a consistent relationship with their mentor and can commit to weekly goal-oriented sessions are likely to derive further encouragement, confidence and impetus to achieve.

- The benefits the mentees described are similar to those experienced by mentored youth in care elsewhere: better emotional wellbeing, increased sociability and self-confidence, educational engagement and progression, and boosting of their coping resources (Brady et al, 2019). Mentors helped them with processes that other South African youth have identified as central to a ‘successful’ transition out of care (van Breda, 2015): reconsidering family connections; identifying social resources that might help them achieve their goals; identifying and maximizing opportunities; and developing self-confidence and hope for the future.

- In the dual context of group living and dislocation from family, mentors offered a consistent, caring adult relationship and individual attention that was highly valued by young people. Formal mentoring is, however, a time-bounded relationship. While some youth had ongoing contact with mentors, this is not a requirement of the programme. From their repeated engagement it was evident that some young people benefit from longer-term engagement with this individualized support. It would be important to consider how to achieve relational continuity for young people and sustainable connections among their formal and informal networks after their transition out of care.

- Almost a third of the young people we spoke to were born outside of South Africa and faced challenges associated with their status as refugees, asylum seekers or migrants. Their informal social networks were especially limited, and while they expressed similar aspirations to their peers, their educational and employment opportunities were significantly constrained by systemic barriers. This made the transition out of school and care particularly daunting and highlights the importance of resolving the status of foreign nationals early in their care placement. This may require access to legal advocacy and scrutiny of current policy to identify and eliminate unnecessary obstacles. Mentors offered encouragement and helped with applications for identity documents or researching education options, supplementing the work of CYCC staff who were responsible for negotiating complex and time-consuming bureaucratic processes.
Participants had experienced family-level adversity prior to their placement in care and had been exposed to community-level violence and a pervasive culture of actual and perceived danger. These experiences impacted on their emotional and mental wellbeing. Some had significant mental health difficulties and required professional therapeutic intervention. Mentors offered a caring, listening ear and helped mentees develop strategies for managing feelings of sadness, frustration, and anger. The cumulative effects of childhood adversity and ongoing community violence present a risk of complex trauma that can undermine a young person's capacity for learning and close relationships, impair their executive functioning and decision-making skills, and impact on their physical and mental health. Mentoring can offer valuable emotional support and help young people find ways to manage some of these difficulties. This is not a substitute, however, for effective, accessible and adequately resourced mental health services. Mentors, and indeed everyone working with youth in care, would benefit from training in trauma-informed care to help understand the behavioural manifestations of trauma in the context of the mentoring relationship.

Promoting social and economic inclusion for care leavers

South Africa’s Sustainable Development Goals, as outlined in the South African National Development Plan Vision 2030, aspire to: economic inclusion through equal access to learning and opportunity, and promoting sustainable well-being through social inclusion. In this section, we consider how formal mentoring contributed towards achieving these two goals for the mentees in our study.

Well-being through social inclusion

- The carefully bounded relationship with a mentor can be a relational training ground for young people, equipping them with interpersonal skills and a repertoire of positive encounters that can be taken into other social situations.

- Youth leaving care are negotiating their identities and sense of belonging to places, family and peers. A key focus of the mentoring role is offering support with these complex processes of identity and connection.

- Leaving care, however, was perceived to be a sudden and near total disconnection from the supportive relationships of the CYCC. It was unclear to what extent mentors were able to help young people make sustainable connections to other people in their communities to replace this loss on exiting care. It was also not clear from our interviews what peer or adult networks the youth already interacted with in the context of their day-to-day lives or what type of support is exchanged in these relationships. It would be useful to understand more about the social ecology of young people leaving care and the potential resources therein.

- In South African policy and legislation, there is a strong focus on reunification of young people back with family. However, young people faced a range of very significant barriers to this. While mentors can help mentees develop new ways of thinking about and relating to family, they are likely to have little ability to affect change in familial relationships or circumstances. The programme domains of ‘home and family’ and ‘community and citizenship’ were important to mentees. Given the dislocation of the young people from kin and home communities, goal-setting in these domains could be exploited to help young people identify and strengthen connections with potentially supportive individuals in their own extended networks.

- In interviews with mentees, mentors and practitioners, there was a strong focus on developing independence. This was articulated by young people as self-reliance or avoidance of dependency. It is evident from their enthusiastic engagement in the programme that this did not equate to an avoidance of support. It has been argued (Moodley et al, 2020) that the social wellbeing of care leavers might be better served by a focus on interdependence, rather than independence, aligning with the concept of Ubuntu. Such a shift in emphasis might promote an earlier, more systematic and sustained effort to foster social connections, of which mentors would play an important part. The explicit focus in the TIL programme on young people’s engagement with community and family may help promote a more inter-connected approach to transition.
Access to learning and opportunity

- Mentees’ primary focus was for personal development and goal-setting in relation to education and employment. These were the domains perceived by mentors to be most accessible and amenable to change.

- Maximizing educational engagement and attainment was a dominant focus for mentors and mentees, recognizing education as crucial to accessing economic and social opportunities. Working with their mentor encouraged a commitment to study, gave some young people much-needed guidance on how to approach their schoolwork and helped them identify options for further education or training.

- The mentees all voiced ambitions and hopes for their future work life. Their mentors helped them to both broaden and focus their aspirations and guided them to identify and access opportunities. Mentoring helped some young people to connect to their own interests, talents and energy. In this way, the mentoring appears to align with a youth development approach to employability (Graham et al, 2019) that emphasizes the young person’s agency.

- The respectful encouragement from their mentor stimulated in mentees a sense of hope and optimism about the potential of their future work life. The access to a positive adult role model helped them to imagine their own ‘possible self’, a mental image of their future self that can serve to motivate behavior. This, in turn, can enable resilience among care leavers (Bond and van Breda, 2018) and is likely to help them sustain their work-seeking efforts.

- There was some adult concern, however, that mentees were holding unrealistic and unachievable ambitions and risked disillusionment that might lead to eventual disengagement from work and learning. In this context, it is an important feature of the TIL programme that mentoring aims to equip young people with the skills and strategies to set and pursue incremental work and education goals.

- The young people we spoke to were motivated to join the mentoring programme because they were already giving thought to their future and had some insight into the importance of education and employment. They were also mainly doing well at school, and older participants were either studying in third level education, working in paid employment or apprenticeships, or both. Older mentees who had engaged repeatedly in the programme found that their sustained engagement with mentoring helped them to navigate the journey from school to further education and into employment and had remained motivated to continue to upskill themselves. The experiences of work and education among our participants may not, however, be representative of care leavers more generally in South Africa.

- Some mentees described how their mentor had connected them directly with potential employers in their networks, achieving the programme’s aim of enabling bridging social capital. Linking young people directly with potential employers has been identified as central to the success of youth employability initiatives in South Africa (Graham et al, 2019). This is not, however, a guaranteed outcome of the mentoring programme, or indeed a core task of mentoring per se. It is also not clear how sustainable these connections are after the facilitation by the mentor has ended or to what extent issues of race and class affect the potential for these connections to be built upon.

- Mentoring can encourage young people to identify and make the most of the opportunities available to them if they are motivated to do so. As the situation of foreign nationals most starkly illustrates, access to opportunity is constrained by structural conditions that are beyond the influence of mentors or mentees. Youth can only be helped to seize opportunities that actually exist in their particular socio-economic and geographical location.
Scalability and programme development

The SAYes Transition to Independent Living programme is well-documented, has a clearly articulated rationale and bespoke materials for structuring the mentoring relationship and is, therefore, potentially replicable. It is based on a sound understanding of the developmental needs of youth who are transitioning from school to post-secondary school life, and from alternative care to post-care life in a South African context. From our TIL case study, there are some programme-specific findings and key considerations that could inform the development of this and other formal mentoring programmes.

- **Supporting the mentor/mentee match:** Mentors were well supported in their role by SAYes staff, all of whom had previously or were currently mentoring and therefore had first-hand insight into the role. SAYes staff facilitated a structured series of joint meetings with each match and these are helpful for refocusing and problem solving. Mentors had access to ongoing support from a link person who offered flexible assistance and guidance. This was, at times, crucial to maintaining the match, highlighting the importance of having responsive support staff who mentors can get to know and trust.

- **Mentor training:** Mentors received preliminary training in the foundational principles of the programme, their role as mentors, and the developmental processes of adolescence and transition. Given the prevalence of exposure to adversity among care-experienced mentees, and their experiences of mental or emotional distress, mentors would benefit from training in principles of trauma-informed care.

- **Peer learning:** Mentors themselves had a good deal of wisdom and insight which could be harnessed through further opportunities for peer learning. Likewise, young people who had completed a cycle of mentoring had insight into how best to utilize this resource and could have more of a role in recruiting and training their peers.

- **Mentor recruitment:** There is a clear difference in the socioeconomic circumstances of mentors and mentees and few had lived in the same home communities. It would be advantageous for young people to have mentors who share similar characteristics or experiences. Some of the TIL mentees do go on to become mentors after leaving care. This developmental trajectory from mentee to mentor could be an explicit and structured pathway for programmes. It would be useful also to explore further the barriers and enablers to engaging volunteer mentors from less advantaged backgrounds in order to develop targeted recruitment and retention strategies.

- **Access for disabled youth:** Among our participants, there was limited consideration of mentoring for disabled youth. Mentors have the option in their application to de-select a match with a disabled young person. We spoke to some mentors that had done so because they felt they had limited experience of disability. If disabled care leavers are to get equal access to formal mentoring, there is a need to further understand their needs and experiences, to incorporate this knowledge into mentor recruitment and training, and to identify the barriers and enablers to their engagement in mentoring programmes.
• **Programme structure:** The TIL programme runs on an annual cycle with most mentoring matches lasting 6-9 months. Most participants felt that a longer match would enable stronger relationship building and more progress on goal attainment. In terms of scalability, there is a payoff between asking enough of mentors to make the experience worthwhile for mentees, but not asking so much that mentors either cannot commit or cannot sustain the commitment. However, given that some mentors repeatedly commit to the programme suggests that some have the willingness and capacity for more sustained engagement.

• **Programme content:** The TIL programme offers a structured framework for goal-setting and personal development across 10 life domains. The Individual Transition Plan format and range of goal-setting tools provide consistency of approach between mentors and a focus and purpose to the mentoring sessions. These appeared to be most helpful when used flexibly and creatively. Since these materials are an important scaffold around which the mentoring is built, it would be useful to draw on the insight of mentors and mentees, working collaboratively with them to co-produce recruitment, training and development-focused tools. This would help ensure that the programme content remains relevant and accessible to those who use it.

• **The role of the mentor in the system of care:** The formal mentor has a valuable and valued place in the overall system of support provision for young people transitioning out of residential care. Navigating the boundaries of the mentoring role, however, can be challenging and requires sensitivity and mutual respect. While the advocacy role of mentors is important, as is helping young people themselves advocate for change, collaboration with CYCC staff is crucial to effective mentoring. Further opportunities to understand one another’s roles and responsibilities ease the tensions inherent in this joined-up approach to supporting youth in care. SAYes staff acted as mediators and a sounding board for both mentors and carers, highlighting the importance of their working relationships with the different elements of the mentee’s support network.
Background Context

Leaving care in South Africa

There are an estimated 21,000 children and young people living in approximately 355 registered Child and Youth Care Centres (CYCC) in South Africa (Jamieson, 2017).

These are residential facilities intended to provide a safe, nurturing group-care environment and a range of recreational, developmental, and therapeutic programmes to support children's wellbeing.

Young people living in CYCC will have experienced a range of significant adversity. The Children's Act 2005 recognises their need of care and protection away from their family home if they have experienced abuse, neglect, abandonment or have been orphaned. Young people in alternative care, therefore, typically have fractured family relationships, can be placed in communities far from home, and have limited access to informal social support.

The purpose of CYCC is to offer temporary alternative care with the eventual aim of reintegrating children with their families.
For some children, however, a return home is not achievable, and the responsibility of the CYCC is then to ensure a healthy adjustment to independence when they exit the facility as young adults, usually at age 18. Some can be permitted to stay in care until the age of 21, but only if this is necessary for them to complete a college or training course (Children’s Act 38 of 2005).

Care giving practices within the CYCC aim to develop resilience in young people and equip them for life after care, offering safety and security within which young people can learn to manage social and emotional challenges (Chimange and Bond, 2020), as well as independence skills training. The Children’s Act of South Africa 1983 calls on CYCC and Cluster Foster Schemes to offer transitional support to youth leaving care. However, there is not the same priority or service mandate for care-experienced young adults after they have exited care. Transition and after-care support are relatively new areas of work for which there is no national administrative data or focused policy framework (Pinkerton and van Breda, 2019). Findings from research with South African care leavers suggest that social support comes to an abrupt end when they leave care and many are ill-equipped to function optimally and confidently outside the care facility. As a result, care leavers’ aspirations and hopes for the future can be undermined by social isolation, feelings of fear, uncertainty and loneliness, and a lack of assistance to help realise their goals (van Breda, 2018).

Social and economic inclusion for care leavers in South Africa

South Africa is classified as an Upper Middle Income Developing Country by the United Nations (World Economic Situation and Prospects 2019), but remains a very unequal society (SAHRC and UNICEF, 2016). Rates of poverty have recently increased and there are significant income disparities (Sulla and Zikhali, 2018), with young people a particularly disadvantaged sector. Deep-seated inequities in well-being, income and opportunity perpetuate intergenerational cycles of deprivation. More than half (59%) of South Africa’s youth live below the poverty line (Lake and DeLannoy, 2015). Many of these young people are socially excluded and disconnected from the labour market, cannot access opportunities that promote employability, and are the most likely to stay trapped in poverty.

Inequality is sharply focused in the lives of young people living in out of home care. It is young people in the poorest households in South Africa who are most likely to be deprived of parental care (SAHRC and UNICEF, 2016). Many do not have the social support they need to help them negotiate the challenges of adult life, leading to poor future prospects: a third (35%) of residential care-leavers are not in employment, education or training (NEET) and 79% do not have a livable income (Dickens, 2017).

There is also significant inequity across sectors of South African society in terms of quality of teaching, school attendance and access to third level education (Plagerson and Mthembu, 2019). This is reflected in the relatively low educational attainment among South African care leavers (van Breda, 2018).
Transition into work is a key issue for youth in South Africa, not just those leaving care. There are too few jobs to meet demand and this is the most significant contributor to youth unemployment. However, in a context where networks are central to finding work, and for employers to find employees (Graham et al, 2018), disconnection from social networks places youth leaving care at a particular disadvantage.

South Africa adopts a Developmental Social Welfare model (DSW) (Patel, 2015) that emphasises social justice, prioritising the poor and marginalised. This model interweaves social and economic development, regarding these as a shared responsibility between all state departments, the private/commercial sector, voluntary organisations, NGOs and the informal sector (including individuals, families and communities). While children are a group that enjoys particular attention within the DSW model, it has not to date given specific attention to young people living in and leaving alternative care. However, there is an urgent need to identify, evaluate and scale-up approaches that can provide bridging relationships to enable young people living in and leaving alternative care to access resources and opportunities and improve their economic and social well-being (Lake and DeLannoy, 2015). This priority for care leavers reflects UNICEF South Africa’s core priorities for adolescents (reduce barriers to learning; build resilience; promote equal access to opportunity), and South Africa’s obligations to care-leavers under the United Nations Guidelines for the Alternative Care of Children (2010), which requires agencies to help children acquire social and life skills, and allocate a specialised person to facilitate their move to independence.

Furthermore, South Africa’s Sustainable Development Goals, as outlined in the South African National Development Plan Vision 2030, include:
- laying a foundation for equitable, inclusive economic growth by ensuring equal access to learning and opportunity;
- building sustainable communities and promoting sustainable well-being through social inclusion.

South Africa’s National Youth Policy 2015–2020 recognises socio-economic inequality and barriers to opportunity for young people but lacks an implementation plan to address this problem (Lake and DeLannoy, 2015). This project provides evidence that can help inform such a plan. Formal youth mentoring is one approach that aims to address the “poor access to education, unemployment, social exclusion, lack of social capital and cultural dislocation” (van Breda and Dickens, 2016, p.350) experienced by young people leaving alternative care.

Our case study evaluation of the Transition to Independent living formal mentoring programme explored what contribution formal mentoring might make toward reducing socio-economic disparities, and improving social connectedness and community integration for young people living in and transitioning out of residential care in South Africa.

**Formal mentoring for young people leaving care**

Formal youth mentoring involves a one-to-one relationship between a volunteer adult mentor and an ‘at-risk’ young person who would not naturally be known to one-another (Blinn-Pike, 2007). Formal mentoring programmes normally recruit and train adult volunteers and match them with young people who would be considered to potentially benefit from a relationship with a non-parental adult (Brady, Dolan and McGregor, 2019). While programmes vary in terms of their duration, intensity, and the issues that they focus on, they generally expect the mentor and mentee to meet regularly for a specified number of months. Effective programmes adhere to core practices of screening, training and supporting mentors, and pairing youth with a mentor on the basis of similar interests (Dubois et al, 2011).

Reviews of the numerous research studies evaluating the impact of formal youth mentoring indicate that mentoring programmes, can contribute to improvements across behavioural, social, emotional and academic domains of young people's development. Participating young people can benefit from increased emotional and psychological well-being, improved educational achievement, reduced engagement in delinquent and aggressive behaviours, and greater social skills (Silke, Brady and Dolan, 2019), although outcome effects can be variable even between young people enrolled on the same programme (Raposa et al., 2019).
The quality of the one-to-one mentee-mentor relationship is central to the effectiveness of formal mentoring. Studies focusing on the relationship between mentors and mentees have highlighted the importance of young people perceiving their mentors to be emotionally supportive (De Wit et al., 2020), reliable, committed to regular contact, and available to respond to their needs (Shier, Larsen-Halikowski and Gouthro, 2020). Effective mentee-mentor connections can be difficult to establish, especially when mentors have insufficient training or insight into the needs and experiences of youth, or are burdened by the time commitment of the role, and when the young person’s personal history makes it difficult for them to trust or engage confidently in relationships (Sulimani-Aidan, 2018). For youth who have experienced maltreatment, a sustained mentorship that is supportive, reciprocal and based on mutual understanding can enhance their social skills and capacity for other relationships (Dallos and Carder-Blibert, 2019).

Mentoring for young people in care and leaving care

Mentoring young people in care and leaving care presents some unique challenges. In their review of the literature, Brady, Dolan and MacGregor (2019) identified several. Firstly, care-experienced youth are likely to have encountered disappointments and difficulties in previous relationships, so it is important to ensure that any new relationship does not add to this experience of disappointment or pose a risk to their emotional wellbeing. Secondly, prior experiences of maltreatment may lead to problems forming attachments with other adults, which may, in turn, stop them from benefiting from mentoring relationships. Thirdly, the transient nature of many young people’s care pathways can act as a barrier. Finally, these authors also noted evidence that some young people are not comfortable engaging in formal mentoring with a stranger, and prefer informal long-term relationships. However, when mentorships for care experienced youth are consistent, dependable and adequately monitored and supported (Avery, 2011), they have been found to have a positive effect in relation to mental health, educational achievement, peer relationships, and life satisfaction, and some limited impact in relation to social skills, attachment, employment, and risk-taking behaviours (Taussig & Weiler, 2019). Evaluation of the Big Brothers Big Sisters programme in Ireland, for example (Brady, Dolan and MacGregor, 2019), found that youth in care had benefited from: better emotional wellbeing, increased sociability and self-confidence, educational engagement and progression, development of social capital, and boost of their coping resources and resilience.
The SAYes Trust is a Cape Town based non-governmental charitable organisation. They have developed the Transition to Independent Living (TIL) formal mentoring programme, partnering with local CYCCs to offer this to young people in residential care to support their transition to independence. Mentors are trained volunteers who offer support, encouragement and opportunities for personal development and employability.
SAYes offers the TIL programme to young people aged 14-25 years old, who are preparing to exit residential care or who are care leavers living independently in the community. Mentors are recruited, trained and supported by SAYes staff who also match each mentor with one mentee based on that young person's own interests and preferences. The mentoring involves paired sessions for one hour per week over nine months. Sessions are focused around an Individual Transition Plan that facilitates structured goal setting across ten life domains. At the end of this time, SAYes staff facilitate a closure meeting with the mentorship pair to review their achievements and bring the relationship to a formal end. This is followed by a graduation event attended by all mentees and mentors. Young people can participate in the programme on repeated cycles and will be matched with a different mentor each time.

Perspectives on how TIL programme aims are achieved

AIMS OF THE PROGRAMME:

The TIL programme aims to combat inequality by helping mentees to engage in education, find work, earn a living, develop relationships and wellbeing practices, and become engaged with their communities. There are three key functions of mentoring as specified by the programme:

- **Guidance** - mentors aim to help build mentee's perspective through sharing information and their own view point; offering different lenses through which to view circumstances; consciousness-raising; active listening; and socratic questioning. In this way, young people can challenge limitations imposed by lack of knowledge or constraining beliefs.

- **Advocacy** - mentors aim to help build social capital by sharing their own interests; enriching the mentee's interests; connecting mentees to social resources; and advocating to SAYes or their own networks to supply social resources.

- **Support** - mentors aim to build a bond that provides mentees with a secure base for social exploration. They achieve this by being consistent; being genuinely interested in the young person; and being forgiving, positive, future-focused, and emotionally responsive.

The 35 mentees, 8 CYCC practitioners and 16 TIL mentors shared their perspectives on how these aims are achieved.

**Enhanced perspective** – Access to guidance

The mentoring relationship was described as unique and different to any other type of adult interaction, in that the mentor guided the mentee toward making their own informed decisions rather than dictating the choices they should make, challenging and encouraging them to take responsibility for their decisions and actions.

“This person is asking you is this the decision you want to take, and how will this benefit you and whether this is helpful to you.”

Mentors spurred them on toward making wise decisions and attain their goals, but that respected their autonomy and freedom of choice. This ranged from general encouragement to 'focus on your life and the future', to specific encouragement to pursue particular activities. Mentors helped young people to achieve clarity in their decision making and understanding what they wanted out of their lives, while encouraging a degree of accountability to themselves in achieving goals. Young people were encouraged to take an active role in their own personal development. In this way mentors were described as having a different role to teachers or carers.

“Instead of being a school tutor, it was a life tutor.”

Their interactions with their mentors offered a fresh ‘outside’ perspective that enabled young people to view their circumstances differently and gain a new outlook. This was most helpful when mentors were prepared to be open and draw on their own experience and personal history to connect with the mentee's specific life challenges.
“With my mentor, she speaks to me from a personal perspective. She doesn't speak to me from reading a book. She told me what happened in her personal life and it touched me in a way and made me view my situation a bit differently.”

“You get to see life in another person’s point of view. Like the way they went through their life and how they ended up being where they are today.”

Mentees felt that their perspectives and preferences were listened to and respected. This in turn facilitated them to consider their choices and make their own decisions more confidently.

Their mentor’s guidance was tailored to their individual needs and aspirations and, therefore, felt very relevant. Mentees described it as a privilege to have individualised guidance from their mentor, giving them an advantage over their peers who might have no one to support them with their decision-making. With this recognition, they spoke of using the opportunity to its full potential, extracting as much guidance as they could from their mentor's life experience. They described themselves as not simply passive recipients of guidance, but active participants in a process of asking, listening and learning. This engagement was highlighted as important for a successful mentoring experience.

Enhanced social connections – Access to relationships

The dominant feature of the TIL programme that young people said they derived most benefit and enjoyment from was their one-to-one relationship with their mentor and the opportunity to ‘open-up’ in the context of a trusting connection. Some mentees related how they, and other young people in out-of-home care, often find it difficult to trust people because of the negative relationships that they have had in their lives. They and their CYCC carers alike took reassurance from the screening and preparation that went into mentor recruitment and they appreciated that mentors had been ‘correctly trained’ prior to undertaking their role. Added to this, the mentor’s reliability was particularly important to young people as the weekly meetings sustained over a nine-month period allowed for a bond to develop.

“I never had anybody to talk to because, like, I felt like I didn’t trust anybody because of the life I had before (entering the CYCC). So like, when I got a mentor [...] I actually felt like she was someone I could talk to.”

“You can depend on them (SAYes) that they will get reliable people for your children so they would be safe.” (carer)

“Consistency is very important. I think especially coming from children’s homes where you have people going in and out. Where you have volunteers coming in and out and you never see them and create a bond or create a relationship.”
Mentees reported that their mentors complemented the support they received from carers and professionals involved in their lives. They described how child-care staff were available to discuss issues at any time but felt that the way they could talk to their mentor differed and was more like a friendship or family-like interaction. This was characterised by: enjoyment of one-another's company; a sense that this was not just 'work' to the mentor, but something they wanted to do; feeling relaxed and able to talk; and a level of flexibility and informality in the arrangements. Some also appreciated their mentor involving them in small ways in their own lives for example, by introducing them to friends and family. In particular, mentees appreciated their mentors sharing examples from their own personal lives, and felt that this opportunity to connect with and learn from someone else's experience added value to this relationship and made it distinctly different from the support offered by trained professionals.

"You have a friend to talk to, that makes you feel special and puts a smile on your face."

"She speaks to me from a personal perspective. She doesn't speak to me from reading a book."

Carers and social workers acknowledged the benefit of the young person having this non-professional relationships, reporting that it offered some mentees more freedom to talk openly.

"Once I step in with my social work profession wanting to speak to the young people, they sort of, they put barriers on. Whereas, a neutral coming in and just being relaxed, just being free and building a relationship with that young person, they feel more free to actually speak to them... their mentor about what is happening in their life on a personal level." (SW)

The value of this friendship, however, was that it went beyond listening and encouragement to actually being able to help resolve difficulties and provide useful guidance and help with problem-solving. Mentees also appreciated mentors who expressed a belief in their abilities. This encouragement stimulated a sense of self-belief and a willingness to set aside fears in order to achieve the things they wanted to do, and helped young people feel more positive and remain hopeful in the face of challenge.

"If you’re feeling sad and you think that you’re going to give up, he just lifts you up and then all of a sudden you say, yes, I can do it because I am capable of doing it."

The young people described what they themselves brought to the mentee-mentor relationship, and they were aware of the importance of give and take for building a connection. For some of the young people, the process of building an open, trusting relationship was an educational experience, and one that took patience and effort. It was helpful for mentees to know what they wanted to gain from mentoring so that they could decide how much they wanted to invest in the process. Mentees respected the input of time and effort made by their mentor and reciprocated this with their own commitment to the mentoring relationship.

"It’s a 50 - 50 relationship that my mentor can’t just do all the hard work and I just sit there and do nothing, like we have to meet each other halfway."

"You need to be dedicated, you need to give it your all because if the mentor is willing to sacrifice his time... you need to show interest and appreciation."
Enhanced social capital – Access to social resources

Mentees talked about their mentors impressing upon them the importance of developing social skills in order to navigate their social world. Many described themselves as shy and lacking in confidence, particularly in social situations, and finding it difficult to talk to others. They had learned from their mentors the importance of being able to interact with others, particularly in the workplace, and of this being a key component of their employability. Some described how their mentor had helped them to overcome their reticence and engage with people more assertively. Some found that through exposure to new people and situations they did gain social confidence and greater self-assurance in various social spaces. Some spoke of modelling their mentor’s confident behaviour in different environments.

“So, like socially I was awkward, like at events I would stand in the corner. So with my mentor, I’ve learnt how to actually speak to people and stuff like that.”

Some mentors connected young people with their own social networks and created opportunities for mentees to have real world experiences aligned to their aspirations and interests. An example of this was linking with acquaintances who could provide the mentee with work shadowing experience. Most of the descriptions were of one-off encounters. While it was unclear whether young people maintained any contact with these networks independently of their mentor, it was evident that they enjoyed the exposure to interesting people and activities, giving them fresh ideas for their own futures. For some, the opportunity, through their mentor’s networks, to develop their skills and interests enhanced their employability, which, in turn, helped them to find work that they enjoyed.

“I would say I’m interested in politics and she was like “why don’t you do job shadowing?” and she posted it on Facebook “hey I have someone that wants to do job shadowing in politics” and then a friend of hers sent her this number and then I went to do job shadowing at (ministerial office).”

One mentee described how a work shadowing with a chef friend of their mentor gave them the confidence and experience needed to get their first job in a professional kitchen:

“So when I had my third mentor I spoke to her about my desire to be a chef and her brother-in-law was working at one of the hotels here, at the (hotel). That was my first job shadowing and first time I was in a real kitchen as a chef, because I got the opportunity through my mentor. That gave me an experience which when I decided to join the (name) hotel I already had an idea of working in a professional kitchen.”

Another mentee described how young people who know what they would like to do can be strategic about identifying their goals with their mentor who, in turn, can source information from their own networks to help them work toward these goals. He spoke of how he was able to learn how to start, plan for and manage a business by learning something of the principles of business management from their mentor’s friends in industry.
Perspectives on TIL programme structure

PROGRAMME STRUCTURE:

The TIL mentoring programme operates on a one-year cycle with the following three phases and eight stages:

Preparation phase:

1. Recruitment: Mentees are recruited through the participating CYCCs and mentors through the SAYes website, local media and word of mouth.
2. Training: Recruited mentors and mentees are required to take part in training to ensure they are well informed about the programme before committing to it.

Mentoring phase:

3. Matching: recruited mentors and mentees are brought together for matching. This involves meeting together in groups, after which mentees identify their preferred mentor or mentor characteristics. SAYes staff propose matches based on these preferences.
4. Mentoring: Matched mentors and mentees meet one-to-one for at least one hour each week over a nine month period with the primary goal of building a positive relationship. To provide focus to their time together, the mentee and mentor identify goals which are recorded in the Individual Transition Plan (ITP). The ITP is a working document that is reviewed and developed throughout the period of mentorship. Throughout the 9 months there are a series of transition workshops where groups of mentors and mentees work together on areas of common interest.
5. Monitoring and support: Throughout the nine months, SAYes staff review weekly reports from mentors, allowing for any concerns to be raised and addressed, or additional supports to be accessed. There are also three Transition Planning meetings that allow for a more formal review of the progress being made on the ITP, and for strategies for goal attainment to be identified. SAYes staff also make monthly visits to the mentees' CYCC.
6. Closure: The mentee and mentor bring their time together to a close by reviewing the ITP in a facilitated meeting with SAYes staff.

Exit phase:

7. Graduation: All the mentees, mentors along with staff and supporters of SAYes are invited to an event to celebrate the mentees' achievements.
8. Post Programme support: For those mentees who are not re-engaging in the mentoring programme, SAYes staff offer continuing support on request. Mentees are given the opportunity to have a further year on the programme. This involves moving through the same eight stages with a different mentor. SAYes also reviews the experience of being on the programme with groups of mentors and mentees with a view to programme improvement.
Time bounded formal mentorship

The very nature of formal mentoring is that it is a time-bounded relationship with a specified start and end date. Carers and social workers noted that the formal structure of the programme enabled mentees to understand the nature of the relationship and its boundaries, to know what to expect and what was expected from them from the outset. They encouraged young people to accept the reality of this time constraint and to "make the best out of this particular time frame". (SW). The expectation of weekly sessions helpfully enabled mentors and mentees to prioritise the mentorship in the context of busy lives. Mentors found it challenging to fit the time for mentoring into work and personal schedules, and to coordinate with mentee’s own packed schedules of homework and extra-curricular activities. Having a specified weekly time commitment was welcomed as protective and helpful for setting the boundaries of the relationship.

"The time was my biggest concern about this programme. I don’t actually know if I have this time to give, but at least if it’s structured I can schedule this hour in the week and it goes in the diary." (mentor)

"Once those rules are laid out the girls knew the expectations, what they were getting themselves into." (carer)

Some mentees appreciated the fact that the time-bounded programme released both the mentee and mentor from any expectation of a sustained engagement, which was especially helpful if they had not connected particularly well.

"It’s a relationship we create for a one year period. So after that one year period you are free to continue as associates or we can go separate ways because not everybody connects, so it’s just a period of time."

Other young people, however, described how one of the consequences for mentees investing in a close, trusting friendship-like relationship with their mentor was that it became more difficult when the formal mentoring came to an end.

"It’s actually really sad because it is like losing a friend that is so close to you."

Even though mentees were aware from the beginning that the formal mentoring relationship would end with the closure meeting and graduation, there was a sense of disappointment and feeling let down by some when their mentor did not stay in touch beyond the end of the programme.

"You had a bond you spoke and then it’s like they forget about you, like literally you feel like they don’t really remember you unless you keep speaking to them, unless you keep bothering them, it’s like they move on."

Mentors also acknowledged that the time-bounded nature of the relationship can be emotionally challenging. Mentors felt that the final closure meeting ‘where you actually disconnect’ was especially helpful for bringing the relationship to a positive end, and to establish a learning pattern of good endings.

"That closing meeting you have is so powerful. It is so emotional, and it really is a good... is there to teach them that the end is a good thing, and it doesn’t have to be negative". (mentor)

While acknowledging that the mentoring relationship must come to an end, some mentees and mentors suggested that the programme should run over a longer time cycle to allow for the building of a trusting relationship and working through meaningful goal setting across the programme domains.

"I’d say that’s just one thing I would change probably. Personally, for myself, to stay with the same mentor for longer."
Carers and social workers concurred that mentees might derive more benefit from a more extended, though still time-bounded relationship with their mentor.

“It’s a long, long journey that you have to walk with the young person to get it imprinted in their minds. So, even if it’s a year I feel like it needs to be a little bit more.” (SW)

The formal mentoring role is closely supported and supervised by SAYes staff, and mentors appreciated the responsive, accessible nature of this organizational support. Mentors described SAYes staff as ‘an absolutely amazing help’ and they found it particularly helpful to know they were not alone in their role. This accountability and guidance helped them to feel more effective and safer in their role.

**Repeated opportunities to participate in the programme**

Mentees have the option to re-engage with the programme and a different mentor. Those who had had several mentors noted a range of benefits. These included the opportunity to explore a wider range of interests and experiences and more time to work through the programme content more thoroughly.

“OK so the first mentor I had, she was very, very like, out of all three of them, she was how would I say, not in the negative context but brutally honest [...] and I think being in the children’s home and having been through so much in my life, I needed someone who could help me be realistic in terms of the decisions I made in my life [...] And then the second one, she helped me to increase my social and academic confidence [...] And then the third one, she literally helped me with my communication and personal skills.”

However, the transition from one mentor to the next could be challenging. Some mentees commented on the effort required to establish a new relationship and some said they found the transition to a new mentor, with their different ideas and ways of relating, to be confusing.

“Like moving mentor is the most difficult part, because now you have to re-explain everything you did with the previous one to the new one, and, he must also get used to you and stuff like that [...] It is nice, because maybe there was something this guy from last year couldn’t help you with, that the new one can... last year we didn’t have enough time to do everything, but hopefully, with this new one, we will get to get it.”

“At the beginning it’s not okay, because now I have to like get to know her. Me telling her about myself and all that, it feels a bit difficult at the beginning. The only thing good about it is just that you see different perspectives.”

Some mentees found the programme content repetitive if not approached with some creativity by subsequent mentors. Mentors also acknowledged this challenge, noting that young people could be reluctant to engage with the same content year on year. Mentors who were more experienced spoke of adapting the programme content to the mentee’s particular interests and needs, perhaps focusing on the one domain that held most relevance and interest for the mentee.

Mentors suggested that the cyclical nature of the programme could facilitate a more developmental approach as mentees increase their capacity to engage and derive benefit from the programme with each successive year of participation. To this end, they suggested that rather than beginning with their ITP and programme domains afresh each year, it may be more beneficial for this to be an incremental process, with each successive mentor being equipped with information to help mentees build on their gains from the previous cycle, “so by year 4 or 5 they should have worked through all the domains” (mentor).
Perspectives on TIL programme content

PROGRAMME CONTENT:

There are 10 domains identified in the TIL programme in which mentees work with their mentors towards goal setting and progressive personal development. The objective of this is to enable mentees to achieve and sustain personal change, through setting and reviewing personal development goals in relation to the 10 domains in order to promote their independence and well-being.

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Independence goals</th>
<th>Well-being goals</th>
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<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Education &amp; Learning</td>
<td>Physical Health</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Work &amp; Money</td>
<td>Social Health</td>
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<tr>
<td>Sport &amp; Recreation</td>
<td>Emotional Health</td>
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<tr>
<td>Home &amp; Family</td>
<td>Cognitive Health</td>
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<tr>
<td>Community &amp; Citizenship</td>
<td>Identity Health</td>
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For each of these domains the Individual Transition Plan provides a framework for enabling mentors and mentees to work together to:
- Develop awareness i.e. think differently about the issue
- Explore options
- Set goals
- Review progress

As markers of development in independence and well-being, the programme aims for mentees to achieve:
- Informed decision-making in relation to independence domains
- Engaging in consistent healthy practices in relation to well-being domains.
For our study, young people were asked to indicate for each programme domain whether this was a topic that was very important in their work with their mentor, not so important, or if they were not sure what this domain referred to. We used a card sorting activity to elicit their views and 33 of the mentee participants completed this activity.

**Education & learning**

All of the young people said that a very important aspect of their mentoring relationship was the focus on education and learning. They saw education as a way out of disadvantage, as a route to independence, as key to achieve career aspirations, to make money and be successful, and as an opportunity for personal growth.

> "Without education you won’t be able to have a better and a bright future.”

**Work & money**

29 young people said that the domain of 'work and money' was a very important focus during their time with their mentor, and only four young people said it was not so important. Most highlighted the crucial importance of work as a means of securing enough money to take care of oneself and support their family.

> “When you go to work, you can help your family, you feed yourself and put bread on the table. You cannot do all of that stuff without work and without money.”

**Home & family**

27 young people thought the 'home and family' domain was very important; five thought it was not so important; and one did not know what it meant. Young people spoke of their experience of being separated from family. Despite their difficult family circumstances, some described an ideal of harmony and safety, and emphasised the importance of family.

> “My relationship with my family is not that great.”
22 young people thought emotional health was very important; 10 thought it was not so important; and one did not know what it meant. They spoke about being empathic to other people, and of the importance of taking care of their own emotional health, particularly through expressing one’s thoughts and feelings.

“Everybody has emotions and some people do not know how to express them and that is why some people end up committing suicide and doing other harmful stuff to the body.”

22 young people thought identity health was very important; six young people thought it was not so important; and four did not know what it meant. Most young people understood ‘identity health’ as understanding themselves better, particularly what they wanted to do and be, and how they presented themselves to others.

“It’s important to me to know who you are and to know yourself as a person […] your mindset clearly is gonna be different if you have a good understanding about yourself.”

20 young people thought community and citizenship was very important; 10 thought it was not so important; and three did not know what it meant. Participants defined community as ‘the people around you’, your neighbourhood, your family. They described a context in South Africa of community violence, and recognised their own potential to help change the prevailing culture.

“Caring for people and also helping people out is a good thing I know one day there will be changes if everyone just gives their opinion and work together. No violence no gangsters no doing raping and such things.”
19 young people thought physical health was very important but 14 young people thought it was not so important. That was either because they already were taking care of themselves or because they believed their health was already ‘good’. Most acknowledged the importance of exercising and having a healthy diet.

“It is important to be healthy, you can’t just eat anything, and I really want to have a strong solid body both mentally and physically.”

19 young people thought social health was very important; 10 young people thought it was not so important; and four did not know what it meant. Participants explained that this domain is about developing social skills, maintaining good relationships with a few people, and managing peer pressure.

“I thought I don’t need anybody, I thought like I didn’t need social [...] that’s what the programme helped me to realize, how (being healthy) connects to being social.”

13 young people said that sport and recreation was a very important aspect of their work with their mentor; 19 young people thought it was not so important; and one did not know what it meant. Some said that they were not interested in practicing sports or had no time for it. Others said that their mentors had encouraged them to discover new sports that they enjoyed.

“I’m not a sport person. He convinced me to try things out. Now I play soccer just to enjoy myself with friends.”
Cognitive health

12 young people thought cognitive health was very important; six thought it was not so important; and 15 did not know what it meant. Young people linked cognitive health to emotional health, and the role of thought processes in managing one’s emotions and the importance of developing “a certain mindset” to avoid stress and depression.

“The way you think can actually change everything in your life, because if you think you can’t do something, obviously you are going to hold back because that’s what you think.”

Young people’s priorities for personal development

Participants were asked to select their three most important domains to talk about further, describing what the domain meant to them and its relevance, and the ways they had addressed this topic with their mentor (or expected to address it when eventually matched). It was apparent that of the 10 life domains identified in the TIL programme, two were more relevant and given higher priority: ‘education and learning’ and ‘work and money’.

Education and learning

For many, education was placed ‘above everything else’. Young people described how they understood formal education to be of crucial importance to securing their futures, a message that they had learned from multiple adults in their lives, “because in this world, without it you are literally nothing”.

“Above everything else, above my pain, my past, being placed in an institution, trauma counsellors and everything, I’ve always had a goal in my mind that I am going to study and get a degree, and I am going to learn, and I am going to better myself. So that’s one thing I told myself, that’s going to be my weapon, my tool, my key to get out of the situation. That’s what’s going to help me to be better than my past and things that I come from.”

Many young people appeared very focused on their studies. They showed a will to learn and to improve their educational achievement. Some mentees believed their academic results had improved as a result of having a mentor/mentors and being involved with the SAYes programme. This, in turn, had increased their confidence and self-esteem.

“Like, my first meeting with my mentor, when I was talking to him, I told him I don’t like school, he said I mustn’t think like that, that whenever there is a choice to make, that I must always think, what is in it for me. So, when thought about what is in it for me, I think about my future and then I chose school for myself.”

“Yeah also my grades have improved [...] I feel much better about myself when I do my studying compared to how I felt a while back.”
Mentees also talked about the practical ways mentors helped them regarding their education, including: helping them explore career choices and looking for courses or colleges; providing educational resources; looking for funding to study; helping them find a new school; and providing support with applications. Mentees spoke of some of the struggles that they had with studying and homework. They found their mentor’s guidance and encouragement with study skills to be particularly helpful in those occasions. For some, their mentors gave very specific tuition, for example with literacy skills and improving their reading, or helping with understanding mathematical concepts by using real world examples and daily activities to facilitate learning.

“My mentor told me how to take notes in class.”

“She taught me different ways to study, like to not study in a long period of time, maybe just an hour and then like have like a daily schedule.”

“She advised me, ‘how about after you summarise your things, you put it around your room, around the house, and when you wake up, that’s the first thing you see and then it gets stuck in your mind and then you create cue cards for yourself and you write terminology.’”

For carers and social workers, a key focus of the mentoring programme was the support it offers with education. They considered education as crucial for successful independent living and what they described as mentees’ “ticket to be involved in the open labour market” (SW). Practitioners commented on the paucity of education among the children in their care, with many arriving in the CYCC having attended school intermittently or not at all and placed in lower classes than their age-related peers.

Carers and social workers noted that those involved in mentoring had a more serious attitude to their education, and small weekly rewards from their mentor were effective in encouraging them to make more effort with their schoolwork. Mentees who had a more aspirational sense of what they might do in adult life were, therefore, more focused on educational attainment as a means of working toward specific career goals. However, for some, this was difficult to sustain after the end of the programme and in the absence of the mentor’s weekly encouragement. Carers and social workers also emphasized the importance of mentors targeting their guidance to the mentee’s capabilities and encouraging goal-setting that is realistically attainable.

“At the beginning of this year they didn’t know what they wanted to study, they didn’t know how to set goals, how to attain your goals, for example, and the mentor comes in and the girls their behaviour, they have really grown and they have said, ‘I want to work pass my English you know, I want to attain this mark’” (carer).

“I don’t really think that is an advantage having to play out the fantasy because reality will strike someday and then what, then we sit with a very unhappy child.” (carer)
Young people spoke of the preparation for money management that they received in the CYCC, being given an allowance to spend independently. However, they valued the guidance of their mentors for learning the detail of how to spend and budget this wisely.

“So with the mentoring kind of helps you basically understand how to manage money and what do I spend my money on and what is important and what is not important. So to get all the essentials first before I get things that I want. You know when you’re living in (CYCC) you don’t think about when I move out I’m going to have to buy this, I’m gonna have to budget my food, how much money I will spend on food, how much an apartment is.”

Young people spoke of the importance of having a career plan - knowing what they want to do and how they were going to achieve it. Mentors helped them develop concrete ideas for pursuing career goals and insight into real life opportunities and constraints. Some mentees worked toward tangible achievements such as getting a CV ready for job applications or doing research on work interests. Others noted more intangible ideas for success, such as working on their empathy and social skills and developing self-confidence. Most spoke of the value of their mentor helping them to research information and gain a realistic understanding of what qualifications they would need to apply for their chosen job.

“He taught me how to use a computer, and how to go about sending letters to companies and sponsors.”

“I was very lost […] I didn’t even have a career plan, a future plan, so like, I thought that would be a good thing to have someone that will like help me to find what I really want to do in life and like, what I want to become.”

For some mentees, one of the most significant ways their mentor had helped them was by introducing them to work shadowing opportunities. Spending even short periods of time exposed to various work environments helped crystallise mentees’ career ambitions, and it equipped them with transferable employability skills that opened doors to further opportunities as a stepping-stone to full-time paid employment, helping them to take strategic steps toward securing employment in their chosen field, when they transitioned out of the CYCC.

“(mentor) got me a job at (shop), and I started working there until I had to start studying, and from studying we were looking for a place for me to do my internship, we went places, we went to guest houses, we went to hotels looking for options. So now I’m working so it is actually, has succeeded yah.”

Mentors described a range of situations in which they had been able to introduce mentees to work opportunities either through: connecting them part-time paid work via networks and acquaintances; helping them overcome barriers to employment (e.g. setting up a bank account); or through encouragement and boosting the young person’s confidence. Practitioners also noted instances where young people were able to establish and follow a structured plan toward securing the type of work they were interested in. Mentors and practitioners alike spoke with pleasure and pride of mentees who had shown motivation and tenacity in pursuing work opportunities.

“By the next week when we met, he had gone to a restaurant, got himself a job as a bus boy, he was talking to all sorts of people, he has joined a model agency. I was just like wow, ok, you have just taken that and run.” (mentor)
Engagement with TIL programme content

The content of the programme involves structured format for setting and reviewing goals in ten targeted domains. This is focused around the mentee’s Individual Transition Plan (ITP). Mentees found the structured process of goal setting in the 10 independence and wellbeing domains useful for helping them to recognize areas for personal development that they might not have considered or prioritised. They noted that having to work through the ten domains encouraged them to focus primarily on their needs rather than their wants.

“You both can be able to focus on what you need, not just what you want.”

Mentors also found that the ITP framework was helpful for providing direction and focus to their sessions, ‘otherwise we wouldn’t know what to talk about’ (mentor). The structured nature of the programme gave mentors confidence and reassurance in their role and meant that their efforts felt more targeted at achieving particular benefits for their mentee.

“To be able to say this is what I am supposed to do today, and even if it’s not the best possible thing, it’s a thing. That was very comforting and useful.” (mentor)

However, they also noted some challenges with this format. Some mentors found the volume of the programme content somewhat overwhelming. They talked of needing longer than one hour per week to be able to work through the programme domains with their mentee. To resolve this, some said they spent longer sessions at weekends resulting in significant time commitment for them both.

“There is an incredible amount of information and I haven’t been able to work through a quarter of all that.” (mentor)

“It’s just that in one year, according to me, it is impossible to go through all of it.” (mentor)

Carers concurred with this saying, for example ‘They are good domains, but you can’t work on all of them once’ (carer).

While the ITP structure enables the mentee and mentor to engage in purposeful targeted sessions, participants concurred that a rigid approach to completing the ITP could be counterproductive. Mentees commented that having to focus on completing the ITP form felt too much like schoolwork and appreciated mentors who adopted a more relaxed approach, or who took the more administrative aspects upon themselves. Mentors noted that young people found it difficult to sustain their attention and tended to erect barriers when faced with an interview style of meeting. Carers and social workers also noted that young people were resistant to a question-and-answer discussion with their mentor, finding this onerous after a tiring day at school. They also noted that a rigid focus on goal setting in the ten domains may even undermine the mentoring relationship for some youth.

Participants agreed that it is preferable when mentors can find creative ways to engage mentees in addressing the programme domains. Mentors described some of these strategies for avoiding direct questioning and opting instead for more activity-based discussions, for example using scrapbooking or outdoor activities, and mentees enjoyed this more varied approach.

“We go out a lot, to like waterfront, because just sitting and talking gets boring, so going out to see around is the best part for me.”

“When you got back home and you’re tired and you still have to work on top of that under ITP which is tiring. This year it’s even more better and easier because my mentor actually does it the easy way, like I can just talk to him casually and he will keep it at the back of his mind, so when he gets home he can just type whatever I told him then he would do the work.”
Some of them don’t understand all these domains and why they need to work on them, and at times, I feel like it is a burden for their relationship because they feel like they need to submit the answers” (carer).

“Being with the mentee is the most important thing. Filling in a form online is not the important thing.” (mentor)

A strength of the programme content is that it is founded in robust psychological theory. Some mentees appreciated that the material had introduced them to new and useful concepts that they would not have considered previously such as “your cognitive health, thinking health”. However, mentees and mentors found the complexity of the material somewhat daunting. Both noted that the programme literature is written in a style that many of the mentees, especially those with lower literacy levels, struggled to comprehend. Mentors found this risked disengagement from some mentees. They found that they had to translate some of the domain descriptions and programme aims for mentees, but sometimes struggled to find straightforward explanations for the concepts.

“The paperwork is a bit too advanced… the language especially.”

“Ja, a lot of it was very psychology. Even as mentors you would read some of that stuff and say you don’t know what that means.” (mentors)

“participants express agreement

“It needs to be more simple.”

“The mentees will ask but what does that mean, and we are like, well I am not sure.” (mentors)

As well as ready access to support as and when needed, SAYes staff provide scheduled support to each mentor/mentee match through ITP meetings, where the young person reviews progress toward their identified goals in each of the ten programme domains. Mentors found that the expertise of SAYes staff stimulated a process of goal setting for the mentee, helped them find direction, and also provided a set of helpful resources and skills for engagement that mentors could model.

“The way she spoke and the questions they asked, taught me how to ask questions better. And just opened up this whole thing, and now all of a sudden there were just ways of how we can solve this issue.” (mentor)

Mentors suggested that, to complement this staff support, experienced mentors and older youth who had graduated from the programme previously could be enlisted to share their skills and learning by helping to shape the content for subsequent cohorts.
Motivated and engaged

The participants in this study were motivated and ambitious. While not necessarily representative of all the young people referred to the programme, participants were aspirational in terms of education and employment, and saw the programme as a vehicle to help them succeed. They had a wide range of career ambitions and engaged enthusiastically with their mentors, believing they could help guide and support them in their journey to achievement:

“I always had this dream of just being my own boss, a successful businessman, having my own company [...] this mentor that I had last year, he was a successful business owner [...] and then he taught me a lot.”

For some, their aspirations were vague and, in some cases, unrealistic. They described mentors having sometimes difficult conversations with them, bringing a more realistic understanding of the options that might suit their capabilities, while also encouraging a sense of optimism. For young people who were motivated but unsure of their own abilities and preferences, mentors offered guidance in exploring their career interests.
“I needed someone who could help me be realistic in terms of the decisions I made in my life [...] she was very honest about that.”

Of critical importance was the way that mentors helped young people access information on training and further education. Some reported that their mentors had given them access to the internet to search for courses or jobs, also doing research on their behalf. Some mentees were also offered real-life exposure to diverse work settings. Together this guidance encouraged mentees to explore a breadth of interests, nurturing their inquisitiveness to gain a better sense of their own interests and options.

“Before I didn’t really know what I wanted, but then I realized my interests- I didn’t know it was my interest until I was helped to identify it... and I didn’t know it could be a career. So, in the program I kind of learnt that.”

Some young people appeared to work hard at realising their ambitions and were tenacious in overcoming educational barriers and the low expectations of others. Their mentors helped bring focus to these efforts. Mentees acknowledged, however, that while a mentor might provide encouragement, guidance, and connections, they themselves had responsibility to seize and make the most of these opportunities.

**Mentor and practitioner perspectives**

It was clear from the mentor focus groups that not all mentees were as motivated or able to engage in the mentoring relationship as the participants in this study. Some had other preoccupations, were unable to manage the intensity of the one-to-one relationship, or struggled with the concepts and language of the programme due to educational difficulties. For the most part, however, mentors described mentees as actively engaged in getting the most from the mentorship, and admired their tenacity to achieve their goals.

Social workers and carers described young people who had a strategic plan to study and work in order to succeed in their independent lives after care. Their ambitions were summarised by one carer as ‘to get independent, get out of here, move into a place, study tertiary education also find a good stable job’. They supported young people’s engagement in the mentoring programme by giving the message that the more effort they put into the relationship, the more benefit they would gain from it.
Preparing for the transition out of care

Participants who were preparing to move out of CYCC care spoke about what this transition might mean for them and the prospect of living more independently. Some enjoyed the practical skills training provided by care staff, which was complemented by their mentors. The inevitable exit from care coincided with the equally inevitable aging into legal adulthood. Young people were in a transitional phase of their lives, developmentally, psychologically, and physically, and were unsure what to expect from adult life. They spoke of this as a liminal stage in which they had competing expectations made of them in everyday life - sometimes expected to take on adult responsibilities while at the same time being subject to many of the restrictions of a child.

“I’m in a children’s home, everything is always done for me. But now that I’m about to leave the children’s home, I am learning how to iron, how to cook, how to apply for college [...] Which is actually kind of nice because now I’m starting to be independent and I actually kind of like it.”

Young people described their current living situation as protective and caring, and while they were appreciative of this, they also noted some drawbacks to the group home environment. Principally, they felt that the care from staff meant that they had few opportunities to make choices or take responsibility for themselves. For some, this meant that the prospect of leaving care was daunting and anticipated not so much as a process of transition, but as an abrupt and absolute life change, from being surrounded by support to being alone. This realization provoked a range of emotions for the young people, including frustration, anger and confusion, and a sense of being ill-prepared.

“I will turn 18 and then I’m going to have to be alone, I’m legal and I’ll have to stand up for myself. There won’t always be people there for you.”

“Mentees were aware that part of the aim of the TIL mentoring programme was to help them become more independent, and they described what this meant for them. They described independence in terms of developing self-reliance and aspired to ‘get to a point where slowly I don’t need help and can do it on my own’. Some stated that self-reliance was necessary in a context where their social networks were precarious and unreliable.

“I must start helping myself, because waiting for somebody, you can even wait for centuries… If you don’t help yourself, nobody’s going to be there to help, you can’t depend on other people, sometimes you need to depend on yourself.”

Mentees commented that although in the CYCC they were taught certain practical self-care skills, they lacked the opportunity to learn from role models the way they would in a family household. Furthermore, they felt that CYCC staff could not provide the personalised guidance that peers might receive from a parent who knows them well. Working with their mentor complemented the skills training that they received in the children’s home. Some went on shopping trips with their mentor to learn first-hand about budgeting and how to calculate realistic costs, or were helped to develop confidence using public transport.

“You know when you live in a home, you don’t have that kind of motherly structure or those parents that would reprimand you when you do this and that right. So, for me I don’t live with my mom and all of that, so that kind of role model is difficult.”

Young people noted that another marker of independence was the capacity to make informed decisions for their lives. They understood that the role of the mentor was to guide them in this process, to help them make better choices and learn how to set realistic goals. They spoke of learning to make decisions based less on emotion and more on deliberate consideration of what might be in their best interest.

“I’ve understood that If I bring in all my emotions, I might not make the right decision [...] If I go with the feeling then I’m not going to be helping myself. So I’ve kind of had to look at how does this thing benefit me [...] sometimes you could be so tied up in a situation and you don’t realize that you could make better decisions or choices.”
Mentees reflected that a skill set crucial for independence included rational decision-making and the ability to set achievable short and long-term goals.

**Mentor and practitioner perspectives**

Mentors viewed their role as helping young people to develop independence in preparation for leaving care. They perceived a lack of safeguards or support for young people once they leave care and were, therefore, concerned for the mentees’ future welfare.

Decision-making and taking control were identified as key aspects of independence, but mentors felt that young people were disempowered by their experience of alternative care. Their perception was that the experience of being shielded by the CYCC meant that mentees had few opportunities to make choices, influence decisions or take responsibility for themselves. While they acknowledged that this helped keep young people safe, they felt that it prevented them from developing independence skills.

While they acknowledged that in the context of group living, it is difficult to tailor transition arrangements to a young person’s individual needs or independence trajectory. While the aspiration of mentors was to empower young people to ‘take charge of their life’, they recognized that some mentees were restricted by CYCC procedures which prevented them from implementing their choices. They also commented that the safe and securely bounded life in the home contrasted starkly with the somewhat abrupt move to independence.

“The home has to keep her safe and that is their priority and they absolutely can’t slack on that but it’s kind of this constant - her trying to be independent and them trying to keep her safe.” (Mentor)

In this context, mentors described their role as helping young people learn how to make decisions as well as guiding them in terms of what choices they made.

“They don’t get a lot of choices and they don’t get to make a lot of decisions... I found it to be quite a journey, my experience, in terms of coaching the idea of independence and coaching the idea of decision making; it’s just something that they don’t have a lot of opportunities with.” (Mentor)

Carers and social workers also acknowledged that the structured environment of the CYCC was an artificial training ground for independence. While practical skills training was available to prepare young people for life in the ‘real world’ ‘outside’, institutional living could create a dependency that ill-equipped young people for this transition. They found the prospect of some young people’s transition ‘very scary’ (Carer), and worried about how they would ‘cope with the daily challenges of being independent adults’ (Carer). Practitioners were alert to young people’s feelings of loneliness, living on their own after years of group care. They were concerned about care leavers’ vulnerability, particularly to peer pressure and felt that as carers they had a window of opportunity to train young people to effectively cope with the exposure to negative community influences.

“Our young people are grappling with their identity and their self-esteem, so they might latch onto the wrong group of friends looking for a sense of belonging.” (SW)

Practitioners valued the input of mentors in helping the CYCC to fulfil their responsibility to prepare young people for independence. Some felt that the transition out of care required sustained preparation in so many aspects of the young person’s life that they queried to what extent the one hour per week with mentors might effectively address this. Others, however, noted that mentees who had completed the TIL programme were more confident in ‘their daily dealings with life’ (SW) and had a more structured plan for their immediate future. The key contribution that mentoring made to the preparation for leaving care was a more individualized approach to planning and opportunity to interact with community structures and environments:

“It seems as if when children are in a children’s home they are closed out to the world. They have no idea what is waiting for them out there, and having this mentor showing them around, easy stuff like starting a bank account or showing them how the post office work or, that kind of stuff. A lot of time we don’t really have programmes for that so the mentors assisting them with the daily things that you actually do when you are out there when you are independent, over 18, that is a great help.” (Carer).
Carers, social workers and mentors concurred that thought, effort and emotion involved in their preparation for transition created an exceptional burden on young people leaving care in comparison to their age-related peers. They noted that young people sometimes just needed a break from thinking, discussing and planning toward their futures, and to be allowed to enjoy their present lives.

“Our young people they are so used to just sitting and I have to speak with. I have to engage with the foster mom or the volunteer or with the social worker [...] So, sometimes they don’t want you to tell them that, okay so today we working on decision-making [...] they actually just want to go out and just have fun [...] they just want to be.” (SW)

**The place of the mentor in the system of care**

A dominant theme among mentors and practitioners was how the mentoring role fits with and supplements the work of the CYCC for children preparing to transition out of care. Mentors said that it had been clearly defined in their training how their role differed from that of the child and youth care workers and social workers. They found it reassuring that their responsibility was not to ensure that the young person’s care needs were met.

“It was very clear that I am not to take on a parent role, or a housemother role [...] and I find that very liberating because now I am not in that space of having to take care of those things.” (mentor)

Within this broad scope of their role, however, some mentors spoke of being unsure of the boundaries on how to engage with the young person.

In general, mentors took an interest in their mentee’s welfare. Some would have liked the opportunity to become more engaged, for example with teachers, in order to help resolve difficulties. They were aware that their role was constrained by necessary group care procedures, but some were unsure what they could and could not do to help the young person.

Mentors spoke of the importance of respecting the position of carers and social workers, and broadly acknowledged the challenges they faced in carrying out their role, but also expressed frustration at what they perceived to be the slow pace of response to some of their mentees’ difficulties. Within this context, their interaction with the CYCC could be uncomfortable and they acknowledged the need to pursue their advocacy role with sensitivity in order to maintain positive interaction. Mentors were mindful that the support and assistance of the CYCC staff was crucial to them undertaking their role with the young person, even, for example, in terms of providing a quiet and private space for weekly mentoring sessions.

“We as mentors are always mindful that we don’t want to upset the way of the home working too much.” (mentor).

Carers and social workers broadly appreciated the additional support that mentors offered to young people but were clear that mentors should not take on responsibilities that fall within the remit of the CYCC staff. However, they did appreciate the ways that mentors could supplement their care by undertaking ‘those small little details which the child youth care centre perhaps misses’(SW). In the context of large group homes, staff recognized their own limitations in terms of providing individualized attention to all the young people, and the importance of the mentor in being able to offer this.

“It’s like an extension of the hand that is trying to assist the young person at the child and youth care centre. So doing a little bit extra, doing a little bit more.” (carer)

“They are filling the gaps where I can’t get to. So, it’s been a great help for me in some instances cause I recently had two mentors taking my young people to get identity documents which has been on my list for a very long time, but because of the urgency in the other homes that I couldn’t get to that. So, for me it’s quite a lifesaver.” (SW)
Carers and social workers also highlighted the importance of open communication between staff and mentors to ensure the young people received consistent guidance and a unified approach. They described relationships that were mostly co-operative and helpful. Some, however, felt that mentors had at times misunderstood the remit of the CYCC staff and the challenges they faced and the rationale for some of their approaches. In some cases, conflict arose from mentors not having a realistic understanding of systemic challenges and the bureaucratic systems within which staff work. Confidentiality protocols meant that mentors did not always know a young person’s full circumstances and staff were unable to share these details that might have contextualized the decisions of the CYCC.

“It became a bit shaky grounds between the two of us where the mentor felt that I’m not listening to the child, but the mentor did not understand my mandate and where I was coming from [...] I need to do things that’s in line with the childcare act and I don’t think that they understood that very clearly.” (SW)

In summary, practitioners commended the commitment of mentors and emphasised the need for a co-operative approach that recognises and complements their primary role in helping the young person prepare for and move through the transition out of care. It was clear from mentor and practitioner accounts that SAYes staff had a clear understanding of the role of the mentor with youth in care, and insight into the complexities of offering the young person collaborative support. Carers and social workers valued a close association with SAYes staff who could aid communication and resolve any difficulties between themselves and the mentor.

Living independently after care

There were 11 young adult participants who had left the children’s home and were living in the community. Ten were female and one was male. All these young adults were still engaged with SAYes to some extent and five still had mentors at the time of interview. They had all been enrolled in the mentoring programme more than once. Some had stayed in contact with previous mentors who were providing them with some level of practical or emotional support. In terms of living arrangements, they spoke of a variety of situations, from living with family members, to living alone or with dependents, as two of them were parents themselves. This group reflected back on how mentors had helped in their transition to independence and were now supporting them with the challenges of adult life.

They spoke of mentoring as filling the support ‘gap’ for young people leaving the care of the CYCC without the support of family to help supply some of the needs that had been met by staff. After leaving care, a mentor was valued as someone to guide them, listen to them without judgement, encourage them, help them grow; someone who was consistently there for them, and who they could trust and speak openly to.

“When we are in the children’s homes because we only know the people that look after us and you’re expected to, when you’re 18 or reunited with your family, to just go out into the world where you have been almost in this little box where your food is provided, your schooling is paid for, your transport is paid for, you’re taken to school and now you’re going into this new world where you basically need to be independent or you have to depend on family that has never been there almost. I think for me, that is where a mentor comes in and it helps, it fills in the gap.”
“We don’t have such a huge community when leaving the home to begin with, it creates people that you can trust.”

Overall, many considered mentoring a life-changing experience, in which they got to know themselves, explored and discovered career options, developed skills, achieved different goals, and grew in confidence. When reflecting on their mentoring journey, mentees described how their priorities changed with their age and stage in life, thus what they got out of this experience and how their mentors helped them also changed along the way. This group had all completed matric (final year of high school) (n=9) or were studying for their final exams (n=2). Some were doing courses or studying at university (n=6). Some were also working (n=7). Some of them were working and studying at the same time (n=5). Mentors had helped them to focus on their developing aspirations as they moved through various stages of education and employment.

“I feel that every year that I’ve been in the program I’ve achieved the goals that I’ve set out for myself.”

“We started to do research about theatre making, that’s when I got an opportunity to go study at (name) theatre and that’s how I became a professional actor that can travel around the world […] if it wasn’t for her and teaching me about education, how important education is, to think about it now I don’t imagine myself in this beautiful look.”

Participants who were living independently faced a range of stressful and distressing challenges in their adult lives. Some described practical guidance from their mentors, for example negotiating with banks and landlords in relation to loans and rent arrears. Others commented that their mentor could be a comforting and emotionally stabilising support, particularly during turbulent transitions. They described how the responsibilities of life could be overwhelming, but mentors helped them identify manageable solutions.

“I’m gonna go one step at a time… Through the mentors I have actually managed to put this into steps… because I think if I have to focus on it all, I will collapse.”

“I went through a lot last year - in my relationships, I also had to move, I went through things at work - so she was there and she helped me through all of that and she calmed me down when I was at my worst.”

Mentees described themselves as having been vulnerable young people approaching their adult lives from a position of disadvantage. They felt that the support of their mentor/s had facilitated their personal growth in terms of their mental health and confidence. They commented that their lives after leaving care might have taken very different paths had they not had the encouragement and assistance of their mentor.

“Coming from a situation of a very vulnerable young person I feel like the program has definitely impacted my wellbeing in a positive way because it helped me to become a stronger person and also become more independent.”

“I couldn’t have done it on my own… watching other girls who run away, who live on the streets, who don’t have the correct guidance or anything like that, I don’t know if I could have been on my feet or I couldn’t have been able to make it to the level where I am at the moment.”

Seven of the independent mentees spoke of forming a lasting connection with mentors, staying in touch after the formal ending of the programme. Mostly, these lasting connections were described as an infrequent keeping in touch and knowing that the mentor could still be called upon occasionally for guidance.

“After my graduation she continued to contact me to see how am I doing on Facebook, she would like my pictures, she would comment and say I’m so proud of you doing ABC.”
Dislocation from family and community

Young people in alternative care have encountered some degree of difficulty in their family circumstances, as placement is usually deemed necessary to ensure their safety and wellbeing. The young people spoke of this separation from their family: of having grown up away from parents and siblings; of never having met them or rarely having contact with them; of parents being deceased or incapacitated.

“I don’t have a family, I’m alone except my brother [...] he is with his mom, and my mom I don’t know.”

Mentees saw their family situation as a factor that set them apart from their peers, and one aspect of their lives where the difference of their care experience was particularly distinct.

“My situation at home is very different to what other people’s situation in their homes are. So, for me, talking about my family and asking me and how I’m doing with my family we don’t really interact like a family because we see so very little of each other. And whenever we see each other we never like, talking about how our week was or important stuff that family needs to talk about.”

When asked about the programme domain of home and family, most mentees explained that this was a particularly pertinent issue for them precisely because of missing the opportunity for family life and a sense of belonging to kin. The experience of distant or non-existent family relationships highlighted the importance of family and motivated them to consider how they might learn more about how to live in a family context or prepare for establishing their own family. Participants described the family as a source of feeling loved, wanted and secure. Although their own circumstances did not appear to match this ideal, the concept of family was nonetheless understood as having central importance to one’s emotional wellbeing.

“That’s something that I have always wanted like a normal experience of what family and being at home would feel like.”

“No one’s love can top up that of the family, and if your family doesn’t love and support you, it’s like you are lonely in this world, because family is meant to uplift you, feel wanted.”

Some mentees developed new strategies for managing family relationships as a result of talking to their mentors, for example through renewed efforts to stay in touch. While these young people still described their family situation as difficult and distant, through their engagement in the programme, they did appear to achieve somewhat enhanced family relationships.

“I never used to visit my family on a regular basis, so my mentors told me that for us to have a close relationship, maybe once a week I should go to my family. I think that is actually what helped. Like I would go there on Saturdays and speak with my family. And I got to see my family more and we actually learned more from each other.”

Others said that discussing this issue with their mentor had helped them to have a more diverse and inclusive concept of family. This helped them to cope with the loss of biological connections by identifying supportive relationships in CYCC and wider networks.

“So, we actually got to speak about family and, like, family is not only being blood related, it’s also those people around you like the people you create and communicate with, your social network, you can also turn them into family.”

For some young people, however, interactions with family members could be particularly difficult and upsetting. Some experienced ongoing stress and conflict in their family relationships or spoke of feeling let-down or misused. This was a motivator to work with their mentors to make independence plans to create a sense of stability for themselves.

“I want to make sure that by all means next year, I am in a college and I am stable where I am because what I’ve learned with family, even though we’re family, things happen and then you end up in the streets. So, you can’t exactly rely on family.”

“I just wanted to be independent. I didn’t want people to leach on me like my parents always did. Like my mom would only call me for money. So, if I had to stay there I would have to be feeding her bad habits.”
Some young people showed insight into their family's personal or financial difficulties and took a protective stance toward them. They reported talking with their mentors about their family history and arriving at a changed perspective on why they were in care and how they should respond to parental difficulties. Some noted the importance of staying 'emotionally strong' to help ensure the welfare of family members. For some, this sense of responsibility for the welfare of relatives led to them undertaking the care of their siblings – emotionally and financially - which meant making educational sacrifices, such as working instead of studying.

"I still take care of my siblings [...] I’ve been the mother figure to them."

The separation from family was associated with dislocation from home communities, reluctance to return to the areas where their family lived and a sense of not knowing their place in the world.

"You don’t know where you belong, you don’t know which community you’re going to fit in. You don’t want to go back into the community you were brought up in."

In this context of dislocation from family, one of the most significant themes in the mentees description of the mentoring was the value of having someone who regularly spent one-to-one time with them, who was committed and dependable, turning up to weekly visits as planned, and making them feel cared-for. Their mentor was available to supplement the support offered by child-care staff, and young people likened this to the encouragement they believed that other young people received from their family. For example, mentors often attended events that were of importance to their mentee, such as sports matches or theatre shows, celebrating their success and sharing in their happiness.

"He would tell me ‘when are you playing that league, let me go check your game, let me go and support you’... he is happy for me and I like that type of feelings."

"Like when you’re feeling sad and you think that you have nobody and there comes somebody to visit you and just make you happy after that, they communicate with you they actually just take a nice walk with you, what other people don’t actually do with you."

**Mentor and practitioner perspectives**

Mentors, carers and social workers noted that most of the mentees had very limited informal social support and few, if any, connections with reliable, supportive adults outside of the CYCC staff. As one mentor said of their mentee, ‘she literally has no one’. Practitioners said that when referring children to the TIL mentoring programme, they prioritise the children who have no family support. The prospect of leaving care was acknowledged as particularly challenging for those young people who had no-one in their home community to support their transition, despite social workers making extensive enquiries.

"There is nobody out there and what we are trying to do from our side is also to try to link this particular child with a community member so one day when he needs to leave at least somebody where he can go for weekends or can go and stay for certain periods of time."

Like the young people, mentors and practitioners emphasised the absence of family support as a characteristic that placed mentees at disadvantage to their community peers. They noted how ‘normal’ transitions to adulthood in a family context tend to be slower, less abrupt and more fluid, with greater access to role models. Speaking of their perception of young people leaving residential care ‘falling through the cracks’, one carer described what they felt contributed to this:

"You know what happens in a normal home where one child is going to study or is going to leave the home and work somewhere else, and you can look at the input and the energy and the focus one family has with one child and how much guidance that child needs to be able to take those right steps in a nuclear family but one can imagine what happens to children in residential care who do not have all that support and that individual attention that they need to be able to make the right steps."

(carer)

Carers and social workers did emphasise, however, that mentors are limited in the extent to which they can guide mentees or help them enhance family relationships because they do not know the full detail of the young person's family circumstance and history.
“It is not (mentor’s) responsibility to work on the family, it is the social worker’s responsibility to work on the family relations, the mentor helps the young person as a mentor, but not give solutions on that, because they do not understand the complexity of the family and the legal issues around it.” (carer)

Mentors and practitioners concurred that, in the context of group care and absence of family relationships, young people benefit from individualised attention from their mentor. Carers identified the limitations of their own role in terms of not always being able to give one-to-one attention to every young person, because ‘the child-staff ratio within the institution is very limited’ (Carer). They appreciated the role of the mentors in helping meet the young person’s specific emotional needs or helping them pursue their individual interests.

“I wish we could have that individual attention everyday with every (young person) but we actually can’t so the mentor will be able to provide that.” (carer)

Transition preparation programmes within the CYCC helped young people to focus on important educational and independence goals. The added value of the TIL programme, however, and the distinctive benefit of mentoring was the individual match of one mentor with one mentee, which gave young people a sense of being uniquely important.

“The children feel quite special when they have their own special person who comes and sees them only, and they don’t have to share it with any of the other children, which is actually quite amazing because being in residential care, always sharing, sharing bedrooms, sharing bathrooms, sharing places, sharing volunteers, you know, sharing everything.” (carer)

In this context, mentors appreciated the importance of being committed to ‘showing up’ and ensuring that their routine of weekly sessions was predictable and consistent.

“In the home they are looking after 25 girls, whereas I am only looking after her.” (mentor)

**Mental health difficulties**

Throughout their interviews, and particularly in response to the programme domain of emotional health, young people described themselves living with feelings of sadness, anger, frustration and disappointment. While some mentioned visiting counsellors, many felt that they had few informal outlets to discuss their emotions, and had limited opportunities to express how they were feeling or work out why they were feeling as they were:

“I was super negative at one point, I was so negative and I didn’t know how to deal with myself. I would cry a lot, things were changing […] so, my mentors, this one and the previous one, helped with my emotions and how to go about stuff. So emotional health is super important for me.”

“In my life, my anger and what is inside of me is holding me back, and it’s like nobody can understand me when I tell them, and it is hurting me because I’m looking for help, even though I have a mentor, I’m trying my best to look for help and to open up.”

In this context, the importance of having someone to talk to was a dominant feature of most interviews, and young people expected that their mentor to be someone they could express their thoughts and feelings to, who would be a listening ear and help them work through their problems.

“There is a lot of stuff we are dealing with, like peer pressure, so we need someone to speak to about it […] someone from the outside to speak to, that can help you with your problems.”

“You just need someone to talk to that is focused on the child – “I want to speak to you about your stuff and I will give you a good advice.”
Young people reported that having their mentor available to listen was important for their mental wellbeing. They valued having someone with whom they could share their inner world, and speak about “things you are holding inside you”. They recognised that if they did not have someone to talk to, this could worsen their inner turmoil and sense of being alone and misunderstood. Having the opportunity to talk about their feelings with a mentor who was empathic and non-judgemental helped them to manage difficult emotions. This emotional support was particularly valuable at times of stress and challenge in their lives. Participants appreciated mentors who could understand their feelings, who were patient and took the time to connect with them emotionally, not putting any pressure on them to speak about their difficulties.

“It worked because she was just there emotionally. There was a time whereby I would say you know what I’m not in the mood to talk and she would understand you know and we would just sit and stare at each other and she would smile and I would be like okay you know, even that it made a huge difference she would just sit and smile at me you know and I would not speak and when I am ready I will talk.”

“It’s not so easy to open up to someone but I do trust my mentor and I do open up to her.”

“Because I was going through so much this semester [...] if it wasn’t for (mentor) being there and talking to me for hours and hours, I think I definitely would have gone into depression.”

Some felt that their mentors had helped them to develop strategies for managing difficult emotions. As a result, young people felt they had become ‘stronger’ and had improved their emotional wellbeing:

“Whenever I feel like clogged up, or in the house I feel so stuffed up and I don’t know how to feel. It’s either too emotional or something then I would ask my mentor we go for a walk and one thing I’ve realized that is that it’s very helpful. Because sometimes you could be so tied up in a situation and you don’t realize that you could make better decisions or choices if you are a bit outside. So when I kind of go outside it helps me when ever to kind of clear my mind and all of that [...] and then you know you have a fresh mind set and you feel better.”

“Most people are frustrated, they are full of stress, they just have so much and they don’t know how to express it, but if you have someone that you know you can speak to, feel free and express your emotions and it’s important that they give you an ear and have some solutions to help you overcome whatever emotions that you feel.”

It was evident that some participants were living with significant mental health difficulties and the impact of trauma. Many participants noted in their interviews that they had experienced very significant personal adversity, and situations of abuse and neglect that led to them being cared for in the CYCC. As one young person explained, “it’s not just a home, it’s home for kids that were abused emotionally, physical and mentally”. Mentees spoke of the impact of this adversity on their emotional and mental well-being. Some, for example, reported experiencing depression and anger. Several mentees described working with CYCC, or with mental health professionals whose role it was to help them overcome the effects of traumatic experiences. Some had found it helpful to talk with their mentors about these feelings.

“I was angry that why do I have to grow up in a home, so I was emotionally broken [...] I was ravelled and angry. My sister [...] was being taken away to foster care, then bringing her back, all this transition was too much for me. So I talk to my mentor about it, even to date I still call my mentor to talk through those things. So emotionally, I’m not unstable anymore and I can now freely speak about it.”

“My mentor used to tell me if I don’t feel okay, I can talk to her, if I feel sad, I can talk to her, if you think suicide things, she must tell SAYes.”

Some participants had witnessed community violence perpetrated against close friends and family, and reported feeling numbed or emotionally frozen. Two participants spoke of the murder of close relatives and friends, and of their inability to engage emotionally in a way that they perceived was expected of them.
“My emotions are, how do I put it, in a freezing mode. [...] I recently lost a friend and classmate, and she was brutally murdered. So, when everyone heard about it, everyone started crying and were heartbroken and I was like, okay... There was, I don’t know, it was like, I’m so used to pain that I don’t see the need to cry anymore. I’m so used to, you know, bad things happening and things like that so my emotions, they no longer show [...] I am shocked that she passed away so brutally, but still, there’s not that ounce of pain left in me because I felt that so much growing up.”

Mentor and practitioner perspectives

Carers and social workers spoke of the mental health impact of trauma for young people and how this affected their engagement with the mentoring programme. They noted that adverse experiences often led to attachment-related difficulties and reluctance to trust, sometimes causing young people to withdraw from close interactions. Practitioners also described how the intensity of the mentoring relationship could sometimes feel overwhelming for young people who had experienced trauma.

“Our young people sort of put up barriers and their guards because of past experiences.” (SW)

“We are working with children with high incidents of trauma, and, of course, trauma affects the physiological defense of the body. It affects how people think, how they feel [...] they feel overwhelmed by everything, because it is very difficult. If you start putting in a growth plan, it is actually just pressure, it feels like I must do this, I must find something, I must have an idea.” (carer)

Carers and social workers described how they educated some mentors on the nature of some young people’s mental health difficulties so that they might better understand their mentee’s responses and the impact of their interactions. They had negotiated a position with SAYes that protected the mentee’s privacy but allowed for reporting of significant safeguarding concerns. Describing one young person’s reaction to their mentor arriving late, one carer explained:

“Everything is either an intense love or an intense hate for someone, there is no middle ground you know, and if the mentor maybe disappoints her, she would be very angry and very furious [...] speaking to the mentor I said maybe in future don’t make promises [...] to me it’s fine if you are running late but to her it is the end of the world.” (carer)

Practitioners also noted the effect that trauma can have on a young person’s education, inhibiting their learning and their capacity to cope within a school setting. They highlighted that mentors need to be realistic when goal-setting with young people who experience mental health difficulties and to help them identify appropriate and achievable avenues for education and employment.

Mentors spoke of their concerns for the mental wellbeing of some young people and their frustration at what they perceived to be inadequate provision of therapeutic support. Some had been advocating with the CYCC for counselling provision and some had offered to source this themselves for their mentee. Carers and social workers, however, emphasized their own position as ‘the next in line of parental care’ (Carer) and their associated responsibility to access therapy and ensure the young person’s attendance.

On the whole, carers and social workers found that when the mentoring relationship was consistent and reliable, it offered positive emotional support and reassurance for mentees and helped them feel more in control of their future transitions.

“It contributes to lessen the anxiety level. They can never take it away because the anxiety will always be there, but it helps [...] to better cope with it, to better handle it.” (SW)
Unresolved citizenship status

In our sample, there were ten young people who identified themselves as foreign nationals: two as asylum seekers, five as refugees, and three simply referred to having been born in another country. Six were originally from the Democratic Republic of Congo, one from Angola, one from Rwanda, and two did not specify. Most had arrived in South Africa as very young children. As well as needing to resolve their citizenship ‘so that we can live longer in South Africa’, these participants described how having identity documents and birth certificates is often essential when accessing services, opening a bank account, attending further education, or applying for a job. They described some of the challenges of navigating government processes to resolve their citizenship status, and the implications of not having been born in South Africa.

“I’ve had lots of ongoing problems and challenges with regards to getting refugee status or permanent residence. So, this has been important because it blocks me to education and learning, work and money. When I am done with high school next year, I can’t necessarily go to tertiary education. I can’t go and get a job because then they might be hiring an illegal immigrant and all of that, so that has been a blocker.”

“Like, after next year I would like to go to a university, but … here in South Africa it is very difficult for a foreigner to get into the university, especially like me, if you can’t pay your own school fees... So like, I would love to study, I actually wanted to study next year, but I couldn’t [...] I’ve tried to apply for bursaries, but most of them say for South Africans only.”

“I would like my mentor to help me find ways of getting my paper passport sorted out so that I can be able to live in the country stably.”

These young people spoke of the importance of having a formal legal identity and of the obstacles they faced in securing the necessary documentation.

“I started working at the salon, so that I could raise money for me to go [to Pretoria] get my papers. I have to go there every six months, like I need to go again and get them renewed. Because I don’t have money yet, I have to wait till December to go when I have worked enough money for it.”

Issues with citizenship status were not solved quickly or easily, but some were able to overcome these constraints with the help of mentors and SAYes staff. For example, mentors were able to search for college bursaries with eligibility criteria that would permit application from non-South Africans. The “battle” of getting their citizenship rights could be demoralizing, so mentors also offered important emotional support, encouraging young people to “not lose hope.”

Despite the barriers, these young people were like other mentees in having strong aspirations for their future education and career. They all appeared very motivated to do well in their studies, citing education as a way out of some of their difficult circumstances, and using the study skills support offered by their mentors.

“We used to read books together, like Afrikaans books because I’m not from South Africa, so I was bad at the language, we did Afrikaans, read novels and stuff, and like my Afrikaans has improved. Now I’m like in the top 10 learners in my class.”

Most of these young people also considered emotional health (n=7) and identity health (n=8) as important areas to work on with their mentors. They spoke of how these two domains were inter-related, with ambiguous legal identities affecting other aspects of their wellbeing. One mentee, for example, spoke of the importance of knowing about her cultural roots and national identity.

“For me it was like who am I, where do I come from, my roots and how do I see myself, how do I identify myself, where do I choose to call home, how do I see myself in public spaces, when people ask me where I’m from. My identity is a person as well, and also not forgetting my roots.”
Mentor and practitioner perspectives

Mentors, carers and social workers spoke of how the lack of a South African identity document created what seemed like an insurmountable obstacle preventing foreign-born mentees from working toward employability, education and independence goals. For carers and social workers, pursuing an identity document was a key priority in their work with undocumented or unaccompanied minors, particularly those approaching care leaving age. Mentors and practitioners alike described their efforts to advocate and negotiate with the Department of Home Affairs to help resolve this for young people, and of their frustration at how difficult and slow this process could be. As one mentor said, ‘to try to fix an ID is like blood from a stone’.

As well as creating an absolute barrier to education and employment, they described how the systemic difficulties and delays with documentation also had a detrimental impact on their wellbeing and personal development. Moreover, these difficulties undermined their sense of having an important contribution, and prevented them from achieving the same social milestones as their peers.

“What kind of priority do they feel they have in the society they are in?” (mentor)

“That affects their wellbeing because they start getting unmotivated and be like, why should I work on my school work and get good results knowing that I can’t apply to go to a university. Also, they see their peers who are able to do all those things, but they can’t, and they also tend to get labelled as refugees or someone unable to do something for themselves even though they would have loved to.” (carer).

Experiences of community adversity

As young people spoke of home and family and of their sense of being citizens within their communities, it was evident that many had experienced significant adversity in their personal relationships and in their wider social networks. Within their own families, they described situations of poverty, the death of close relatives, parental mental illness and drug misuse. They were aware, however, that their placement in the CYCC was intended to protect them from this personal adversity and, as noted above, some had very little ongoing contact with their families. Some young people had been subject to traumatic experiences of community violence targeted towards them personally, and had been raped, robbed, and beaten up. Some had relatives and close friends who had been badly injured or brutally murdered. Outside of these specific episodes of assault and loss, young people spoke of community level adversity as pervasive and difficult to escape, and of Capetown as a place where “people like every second day, are dying”. They spoke of community danger as a dominant feature of their day-to-day lives, living in perpetual fear within dangerous communities. They described a preoccupation with finding strategies for staying safe on their journey to and from school, or merely walking through their neighbourhoods.

“It’s just really stressful on me and everything because I keep thinking, because I take a taxi (to school) every single day, what if I take a taxi and then on my way, something happens? You know, it’s just something that I can’t help but think because I live in a very chaotic environment and community. Even the surrounding where my school is, it’s gangsters and things like that, so I think to myself, what if today, I don’t make it home?”

Descriptions of exposure to community violence were gendered, with young men fearful of gangs and physical assault, and young women fearful of violent or fatal rape and abduction. While both reported various encounters with danger in their communities, females spoke more of having to be especially alert, and also expressed concern for the rest of their families living within the same dangerous communities. Some female participants felt very angry about this situation and were motivated to advocate for a safer and fairer society for women.
“Rights for women. So, I mean like, we should stand together for women because now, in the world [...] they abuse, they rape us, and stuff like that. So, I think we should stand and show them that we are not just women, we also have rights.”

Endemic community-level adversity compounded participants’ sense of dislocation. Young people emphasised the importance of feeling that you belong to the neighbourhood you live in, of forging mutually supportive connections with the people that live around you. However, they worried that this would be problematic in dangerous areas and were uncertain which community they might safely integrate into.

“A key issue raised by mentees was the fact that they and their mentors lived in very different neighbourhoods. When they returned home to stay with family during the holidays, or moved out of the CYCC, they found it difficult to connect with their mentors who felt unable to visit what were perceived to be dangerous areas.

“They couldn’t find a mentor that lives close to me because at that time I was living like in a kind of dangerous area.”

Mentor and practitioner perspectives

Mentors spoke of inequality as endemic to South African society, and of how this was exemplified by the local geography of Cape Town, where both poverty and community violence are concentrated in particular areas and neighbourhoods. They described firm boundaries that proscribed their own movements within the city, and also kept young people firmly within their home areas, with little opportunity for interaction with others from different communities or use of wider public spaces. Mentors and carers noted the difficulty of sustaining the mentoring relationship with young people who were staying in perceived ‘no-go’ township areas.

“My mentee lives in a very dangerous area where she goes on her school holidays. I was going to go there, and I literally had colleagues stop me and say there is no way you are going there, we are not going to let you go there. Colleagues offered to go with me. And I felt really bad for not being able to see her during the school holidays [...] It sounds terrible and it sounds judgemental, but that’s the reality of the two worlds that South Africa is, and Cape Town specifically, these different worlds.”

(mentor)

Economic disadvantage

Some mentees spoke of the poverty of their family and home communities. They felt that the mentoring programme offered an opportunity to achieve more for themselves than what could have been possible if at home. The desire to avoid poverty and gain financial security was a strong motivator driving them to work toward education and employment goals. They spoke of using the child and youth care facility as well as mentoring, as a platform for forging a life for themselves that was stable and comfortable, and wanting, to not only provide for themselves, but altruistically look out for their families as well.

“I just want to be financially stable. I grew up in a mostly poverty area, so I don’t want my kids to grow up in that way. So my goal is to be financially stable. I think that that’s all I’ve been thinking about. I don’t want my kids or my sister’s kids to grow up the way I grew up.”

Participants spoke of their sense that, as young people in care, their position in society was one of lowered access to opportunity and lowered expectations. In a context where some have more opportunities than others, mentees expressed a commitment to appreciating and seizing the life chances open to them. Speaking of their journey to becoming a hotel chef, for example, one participant commented on how such a transition is not expected from a young person in care:

“I see someone from a children’s home right into a five-star hotel.”

While this mentee had become comfortable in their work-place, others spoke of feeling out of place in more advantaged environments, and they found interactions with wealthy employers very stressful. Mentors introduced mentees to places and experiences they had never been before even within the Cape Town area. One young person spoke of their mentor taking them to popular local attractions such as Kirstenbosch gardens, which, although quite local to them geographically, were places they had not had opportunity to visit.

“We already have... I wouldn’t call it a disadvantage, but we don’t really have a lot of opportunities.”
Most young people stated that when they list their preferences at the matching stage of the programme, they tend to choose a mentor who is successful in their chosen field of work. Their expectation is that such an individual will be a positive role model and have useful connections, helping them on their own journey to success.

**Mentor and practitioner perspectives**

Carers noted the value of young people having mentors and role models from similar backgrounds who could give a realistic insight into what might be achieved by individuals with similar experiences of disadvantage.

"Sometimes there are mentors who come from the same area that these girls come from and they think there is hope, if that person can do it then I can also do it." (carer)

They noted, however, that mentors were usually wealthier and had little experience of mentees’ home communities. They felt that this also could be beneficial, with mentors offering young people exposure to environments and experiences that they would not normally have, for example going to coffee shops or leisure activities. However, they noted that this could generate tension between young people and their families who could not offer access to these opportunities, potentially undermining these connections. They also sensed that mentors, while motivated to give mentees access to enriching opportunities, also felt uncomfortable about this disparity.

"Most of the mentors come from, can I say rich areas, so our girls are not used to that because they come from a poor background. And yes, someone comes and wants to take me to the ice rink and I have never been to the ice rink or the cinema, that is so nice [...] sometimes the mentors will have this shame so, let me take her there, let me buy her this and take her for coffee because she has never been for coffee anywhere, and girls take advantage of it" (carer).

"When the mentor takes the young person to coffee shops, cinema, outing, that is a bit of an imbalance as compared to what the family can do [...] when they go home might not be able to get that, so they are not keen on going to their homes." (carer)

Mentors themselves also described this desire to offer mentees experiences that they normally had no access to, and they spoke of their sense of frustration that they were unable to do more to smooth the young person’s transition to adulthood. They spoke with admiration of the resilience of their mentees whom they perceived to be facing life challenges that were disproportionate to their young age.

"You realise that the basic fundamental struggles she is facing that I have never had to deal with as a 43 year old and she is 14. So, it has given me a huge appreciation and respect for any young learner living in a children’s home." (mentor)

**Race and class**

Participants were not asked specifically to discuss perceptions of race or class, and the issue surfaced in only a minority of the interviews. One young white male, for example, described how his white peers in school tended to shun him or look down on him because he lived in a CYCC, which he described as being a “home kid”. Because of this, he said he preferred to socialize with coloured peers whom he found to be more accepting. Another young person, when asked what the domain of community and citizenship meant to him, said that he hoped to be able to contribute toward a more peaceful and accepting society and challenge racism:

"I would like to change the violence. Like in my community, there’s a lot of racism. People judge our family because it’s only coloured and the others are all whites. So, they basically judge us of our skin colour. It is like apartheid is not gone yet, it is still there, people still judging you on how you look. So, I think that that should change."

One mentee said that before joining the TIL programme, they presumed that mentors would mostly be white, and associated this with a sense of being patronised:

"When they first told me about SAYes, I was like okay it’s one of those white people that are trying to think that they are here to solve problems, that was my thinking at the time. So I was like no, I don’t want anything that has to do with people feeling sorry for us."
Mentor and practitioner perspectives

Most of the mentors who took part in the focus groups were white. They referred to racial differences from their mentees who they said were mostly black or coloured, and of this being linked also to economic and class differences. They spoke of this as an opportunity to challenge stereotypes, address mutual misunderstanding, and build a more accurate insight into one another’s culture and racial experience.

“The ideas that they have of me as a white person – I can bust those myths. [...] That was huge – breaking that racial or class or stereotype and being really open about it, but then understanding how she thinks about me.” (mentor)

Carers and social workers also noted that, in their experience of the programme, mentors usually are white professionals while the young people in their care are mostly black or coloured and from less affluent circumstances. They commented that this had the potential to reinforce racial and class stereotypes by confirming mentees’ perceptions of white people having greater access to social capital. Indeed, they noted that young people often prefer white professional mentors on that basis. A preference among social workers and carers was for young people to have more inspirational role models from their own cultural background.

“It reinforces pre-concepts that people have about white people being rich and black people being poor. You can ask a lot of kids do you want (a mentor) they say yes, please, but please not black, I want white. You reinforced that it is only rich white people have time to become a mentor.” (carer)

Disability

Mentors were asked specifically to comment on their experience of mentoring disabled young people, however none in the focus groups had done so. They noted that during their recruitment to the programme, they have the option to select to work with disabled young people or not. Those who commented felt that they would be ill-equipped to fulfil that role and somewhat daunted by the prospect. They agreed that mentoring young people with physical or intellectual disabilities would require a different skill set and additional training:

“I must say I was a bit scared and I would still be scared to tick the disability box [...] I have a friend that’s in a wheelchair, but it’s a scary path for me and I have never been there.” (mentor)

“Maybe there is two separate streams [...] if you ticked the box that asks would you be willing to work with mental or physical disability, or learning disabilities, then the onboarding is different. Because I do agree with you, I think it would require a whole different approach.” (mentor)

Mentors did, however, describe educational special needs among their mentees, with some young people being ‘two or three years behind in their education’. They spoke of the challenges this presented in the context of the mentoring relationship, particularly the literacy levels required to work through the programme content, and some described the creative ways they found to overcome this:

“The challenge I have is that (mentee) cannot even read properly. So if you do an exercise and you say let’s go through this. And you can see he is battling. His literacy levels are poor.” (mentors)
Carers and social workers highlighted some of the challenges they encountered in terms of meeting the needs of disabled young people within the CYCC, particularly when disability intersected with experiences of trauma. One carer, for example, described the difficulty of accessing trauma counselling for a deaf young person when "it took two to three months to try and find an interpreter". They expressed their aspiration that this young person would be able to participate in the mentoring programme.

"I can only imagine what a great relationship it can be if someone could just simply sign with her." (carer).

Carers and social workers were particularly concerned for young people whose educational challenges were further impacted by emotional and mental health difficulties. They found that some young people's complex needs affected on many domains of their life, while limited community supports made the transition to independent community living very difficult.

"His IQ is probably equivalent to that of a five or six year old. He’s 19. He does not have good relationships with anybody in the community. We try to place him out, we were not successful. He is still living with us, we don’t get a subsidy for him, but it’s also to just try and help him. He needs to get a disability grant." (carer)

Practitioners commended the patience and commitment of mentors who dedicated time to helping young people who struggle with their school work. However, they noted the importance of having, and helping the mentee to have realistic expectations of what they might achieve educationally and in what time frame.

Young people were not asked explicitly about disability and while most talked of their challenges with studying, none spoke of being or identifying as disabled. One young person did, however, challenge the expectations that they felt had been ascribed for them in terms of schooling. This particular youth pointed out that with the help of the mentoring programme, they had surpassed what others had expected them to achieve:

"The SAYes things supported me a lot because I moved from school of skills to a normal school. I was in a school of skills because people thought I had disability issues like I couldn’t hold a pen right. That’s what they said. So, I proved them wrong, I’m at college now."
The purpose of this project was to provide an evaluation of the SAYes Transition to Independent Living (TIL) formal mentoring programme offered to young people in out-of-home care and care leavers, as a case study of formal mentoring.

The aim of the project was to explore whether formal mentoring might offer an effective, scalable approach to achieving South Africa’s development goals, as outlined in the South African National Development Plan Vision 2030, with a particular focus on care-experienced youth. Specifically, we were interested in the goals of promoting sustainable wellbeing through social inclusion; and economic inclusion through equal access to learning and opportunity. The project was undertaken jointly by the Children’s Institute, University of Cape Town, and Queen’s University Belfast, in partnership with the SAYes Trust.
Study design

This qualitative study involved semi-structured and focus group interviews with a cross-section of the key actors in the TIL programme: mentors, mentees, and child and youth care workers. Interviews were conducted jointly by researchers from the two universities between September 2019 and January 2020 in Cape Town.

The interview data was supplemented by desk-based analysis of SAYes TIL administrative data; analysis of the local policy and legislative context; and review of international research on formal mentoring for youth living in out-of-home care and care-leavers.

The collaboration between researchers from the United Kingdom and South Africa brought a cross-cultural perspective to the project. A key consideration, therefore, was to ensure that conventional research methodologies were appropriate to and respected the culture and practices of care-experienced South African youth. We were mindful that in any research project, the researcher will be influenced by their own cultural context, and potentially risk asking the wrong questions in the wrong way or focusing on issues that are important in their setting, but not necessarily relevant in other locations. We therefore put in place checks and balances at each stage of the research process to ensure that obvious and avoidable sources of bias were identified and challenged.

Regular team meetings convened via Skype, and two sets of workshops held in Cape Town at the data collection and analysis stages allowed us to come to a common understanding of how mentoring, out-of-home care, family relationships and young adulthood, are constructed; to collaborate on formulating the research questions and interview schedules; and to ensure that each approach was compatible with practices in South Africa.

We maximised the benefits of our diverse cultural perspectives through joint data collection, analysis and dissemination. We further consulted with South African and international stakeholders at a symposium convened in Cape Town in February 2020 to help us understand the implications of the data for policy and practice.

Study Participants and Recruitment

A purposive sample of participants was selected to represent all key actors in the TIL programme: mentees who were preparing to leave, or had recently left, out-of-home care, TIL volunteer mentors, social workers and carers in Child and Youth Care Centres (CYCC).

Mentee participants were aged between 16 years and 25 years old who were living in a Child and Youth Care Centre and preparing to transition to independence or were recent care leavers already living independently in the community. The 35 young people who took part represented a cross-section of mentees drawn from the preparation, mentoring and exit phases of the TIL programme (see page 20 for explanation of these phases).

- **Preparation phase (7 participants)**
  - These participants had received preparatory training and were awaiting a match with a mentor. They gave us particular insight into mentees’ motivations and aspirations for the programme.

- **Mentoring phase (17 participants)**
  - These young people were currently engaging in TIL mentoring. They gave us contemporaneous insight into the views and experiences of those actively involved in mentorships.

- **Exit phase (11 participants)**
  - These participants had graduated from the TIL programme in the last two years. They gave us insight into the potential benefits that extend beyond the programme.

This purposively selected sample captured a range of views and experiences from care-experienced young people who were approaching, engaged in, and had completed TIL. It also reflected a range of characteristics among each cohort in terms of age, gender, care status (i.e. in care or care leaver) and Child and Youth Care Centre.
Young people still in care were recruited from eight different Child and Youth Care Centres in Cape Town engaged with the TIL programme. Care leavers were recruited from the SAYes alumni, which is a group of care-experienced former mentees who act as ambassadors for the TIL programme and offer a discussion forum for care leavers.

Mentors

The sample of 16 TIL volunteer mentors was also purposively selected to reflect a range of characteristics including age, gender, ethnicity, employment status, and experience of mentoring.

Carers

The three social workers and five carers who participated represented six different Child and Youth Care Centres and were purposively selected to reflect the different types of facilities where mentees are cared for.

The research team prepared written invitations and information sheets which were given to the selected sample of prospective participants by SAYes staff who then negotiated a suitable interview time and venue and made transport arrangements for those who wished to take part.

Data collection

Youth Mentees

All youth mentee participants took part in an individual semi-structured interview lasting approximately one hour which focused on the following topics:
- how mentees understand mentoring and the purpose of the relationship with their mentor;
- motivations for getting involved in the TIL programme;
- a card-sorting exercise that explored the meaning and relative importance of the 10 programme domains for each participant and their goal-setting activity;
- the benefits and impact of mentoring;
- aspirations for the future and how mentoring might help them achieve their goals;
- suggestions and recommendations for the mentoring programme;

Youth who were currently taking part in the mentoring phase of the TIL programme were invited to participate in a second qualitative interview shortly after their graduation from the TIL programme in November 2019.

Carers

Individual semi-structured interviews with carers, also lasting up to one hour, focused on their perceptions of the benefits of TIL for young people, drawbacks and challenges, and suggestions for the future development of the programme.

Mentors

Mentors participated in one of two focus group interviews each of which lasted approximately 1.5 hours. The group interview format facilitated discussion of ideas, and opinions and was useful for gaining the views of several mentors at one time. Prompt questions were designed to elicit general experiences and views of mentoring across all phases of the TIL programme. Across both groups, the following broad issues were focused on: perceptions of the benefits of mentoring for themselves and mentees; any drawbacks; support for their mentoring role; and suggestions for future development of the programme. Specific questions were revised prior to the second focus group to probe in more depth the issues raised in the first group interview.

Data analysis

All interviews were digitally audio recorded with participant consent, and transcribed into Word documents by experienced local transcribers, and anonymised.

We used Nvivo 12 data analysis software to facilitate joint thematic analysis of the interview data by researchers in Queen’s University Belfast and Children’s Institute Cape Town. The use of this internet-based software enabled communication and promoted transparency and a clear audit trail in our management of the analysis. Our collaborative approach to analysis included techniques to promote inter-rater reliability, and processes to mediate against the introduction of culturally selective filters in the analysis and reporting of findings.
The aim of our analysis was to understand participants’ lived experience from their own position. We took a cross-sectional approach which involved devising a hierarchical system of themes and sub-themes (Ritchie and Lewis, 2003), which were initially derived from analysis of a small number of transcripts and then applied across the whole data set.

We did this by following the staged approach to thematic analysis described by King and Horrocks (2010): 1) descriptive coding, 2) interpretive coding, 3) agreeing interpretive themes, 4) applying themes to the full data set, 5) identifying over-arching themes. The first two stages were conducted by each researcher independently with a small number of transcripts. Stage 3 was undertaken as a conversation between the researchers to agree themes. At stage 4, each researcher applied the themes as a coding frame to an allocated batch of data and had two of their coded transcripts reviewed by another team member for consistency. At stage 5, we returned again to collaborative discussion to identify overarching themes that characterised key concepts in the analysis, drawing on theoretical ideas and relating back to the project aims.

This method allowed us to work collaboratively while located at a distance and to move through a series of analytical tasks with consistency to develop a conceptual and explanatory account from the data.

**Ethical considerations**

Ethical approval for this study was granted by the Research Ethics Committee of the School of Social Sciences, Education and Social Work at Queen's University Belfast, and by the University of Cape Town Faculty of Health Sciences Human Research Ethics Committee. Our key ethical priorities were to ensure that all individuals, young people, mentors and CYCC practitioners alike, were participating voluntarily based on fully informed consent, that we preserved their privacy and confidentiality, that we safeguarded the welfare of all participants and that arrangements for interviewing young people were trustworthy and safe.

**Informed consent**

All prospective participants were given information leaflets about the study to help them decide whether to take part. The leaflets clearly identified the subject matter of the research and outlined the potential risks and benefits of taking part. Individuals were given time to ask any questions about the study, and seek the advice of others, before deciding about participation. Information leaflets were written in straightforward language and were translated into the three official languages of South Africa’s Western Cape - English, Afrikaans and isiXhosa. These leaflets emphasised that participation was voluntary – individuals who received an invitation were under no obligation to take part, it was entirely their choice, and those who did decide to be interviewed could subsequently change their mind.

Verbal and written consent was obtained from all participants prior to starting the interview. The information sheets were discussed to ensure they were understood, and participants then signed their name or made their mark to indicate their willingness to be interviewed and audio recorded.

Once the interview started, participants could stop or pause the discussion at any stage, switch off the digital audio recorder, or take a break. If they did not wish to answer a particular question, they did not have to. No participants made use of these safeguards. After the interview, if they decided that they no longer wanted their interview data to be part of the research, they had until one week after the interview to let us know, which none did.

**Privacy**

Recruitment was facilitated by SAYes staff and the CYCC so the researchers only met individuals who had read the participant information leaflets and indicated that they wished to take part. The researchers did not have access to the personal details of participants other than their name, age, CYCC and any information they chose to disclose during the interview. No-one was asked to divulge sensitive or personal information that was not related to the research.

Participants were interviewed individually in a quiet room where their interview could not be overheard. At the beginning of the group interview with mentors, ground rules
for confidentiality were agreed, including not disclosing names or personal details about mentees or other third parties. While SAYes staff knew who took part, they did not know what any participant said in their interview. The two universities had robust processes in place to ensure secure storage of the data.

In the interview transcripts, participants’ names were replaced with pseudonyms, and all other names were replaced with generalised nouns and pronouns. In all reports and presentations, findings are being reported thematically and we have taken care not to disclose sequences of events or clusters of information that could lead to ‘jigsaw’ identification of any individual.

**Participant wellbeing**

While young people can participate in the TIL programme from the age of 14 years, we minimised the inclusion of vulnerable populations by recruiting young adults aged 18-25 years, and older adolescents aged 16-17 years. As the study posed minimal risk, we secured dispensation to waive the South African requirement for parental consent for 16-17 year old youth. Permission for recruitment was obtained, however, from the management of each CYCC.

We took care to ensure the comfort and wellbeing of participants.

Interviews were conducted by experienced researchers in a quiet, comfortable room with refreshments provided. A familiar adult was constantly available in the building where youths were being interviewed. Young people were provided with transport to and from the interview and were not required to travel after dark. We had an agreed protocol for taking a respite break should a participant become upset and for reporting mechanisms for safeguarding a child or vulnerable adult at risk of harm. Use of this protocol was not required.

Each interview ended with a short ‘de-briefing’ conversation with the option of referral for additional support for any participant who wanted or needed it.
Conclusion

- Many young people in care, the mentees in this study included, have experienced fractured family relationships, dislocation from home communities, and significant personal, family and community level adversity. Their limited access to productive social networks is likely to contribute to continued poverty and disadvantage (Lake and DeLannoy, 2015), highlighting the fundamental association between social and economic wellbeing.

- A critical benefit of the TIL mentoring programme is the one-to-one match between mentor and mentee and the potential for a caring, supportive relationship to grow from their reliable, consistent engagement, albeit time-limited, in the mentorship process.

- Formal mentoring programmes should, therefore, have relationship-based practice as a cornerstone of their approach, and not underestimate the potential benefit of small but consistent gestures of care and attention and time-bounded relationships. Programmes must also be mindful that young people’s relational history is likely to impact on their capacity to trust, develop a secure sense of self or manage the boundaries of close relationships. It is important that mentors are equipped to recognize and respond to the effects of trauma and attachment-related difficulties in these relationships.

- The safety and security provided by Child and Youth Care Centre staff lays a crucial foundation for recovery and the development of healthy relationships (Chimange and Bond, 2020). Formal mentoring allows young people to build on this foundation and to develop their social skills, confidence and a positive sense of self in the context of an individualized nurturing relationship with an adult outside of their care facility.
The TIL mentoring does appear to address some of the barriers to employment for youth identified by Graham et al. (2019). Mentees described how their mentors helped them to access information about the labour market, offered guidance on looking for and apply for jobs, helped them develop skills of self-efficacy and social interaction, encouraged them to connect with their talents and interests and motivated them to persist toward attaining their goals, all of which are pivotal to employability. TIL mentoring encourages a focus on young people’s agency and choice, and on identifying and building on their strengths and interests. In this regard, it avoids a deficit approach or framing youth and youth transitions as problematic.

Much of the leaving care research in South Africa has been informed by an ecological conceptualisation of resilience (Van Breda, 2018) that emphasises the interconnection between young people’s individual characteristics and capacities, their access to social resources, and the way they interact with these resources in their social world. It appears that the TIL mentoring can help facilitate each of these dimensions of resilience. On a personal level, mentoring can boost young people’s self-confidence and provide a focus for their motivation and aspirations. Mentoring offers a valuable social resource in the form of a relationship with a caring adult role model outside of the care facility, and some, albeit limited, connection to wider social networks. Access to guidance, information and fresh perspectives can help mentees to identify and interact differently with the resources available to them.

Our case study evaluation focused on one formal mentoring programme for care-experienced youth in South Africa’s Western Cape. It has the potential, however, to be scalable beyond this context, and the well-documented structured framework of the TIL programme allows for replication. However, this requires a well-resourced support team, consistent income stream, and a steady supply of committed volunteer mentors. Extending access to formal mentoring to care leavers more widely, therefore, is likely to require: targeted resources from Government and the providers of alternative care; and an explicit legal and policy mandate for individualized, extended care leaver support.

In summary, formal mentoring can help enable resilience and promote engagement with educational and employment opportunities. It is, therefore, an important component in the overall provision of care and support to youth in care and leaving care. This individual-level intervention is, however, one part of the picture and does not eliminate the need, as other authors have noted (Spencer et al, 2010; Silke et al, 2019), for an integrated approach, a well-resourced system of care and access to ongoing material support to meet the needs of youth transitioning out of care.

Young people leaving care encounter significant challenges and deficits in their social environment. There are aspects of structure and context that impact on the lives of youth leaving care and are not readily addressed: their socio-political context (e.g. lack of access to disability grant if disabled; constrained opportunities for those without settled status); their economic context (e.g. high rates of poverty and unemployment); their relational context (limited social networks and fragmented family support); and their community context (e.g. high levels of violence, inequality and adversity). While these issues are beyond the scope of influence of most mentors, they form the context for the individual mentoring relationship. It is important to help mentors identify ways in which they can and cannot make a difference. The concept of ecological resilience offers a potentially useful framework for mentors to understand their role and to work with mentees to identify targets for achievable change at the personal, environmental and interactional levels.
Priorities for further research

- **Testing the foundational psychological principles**: interdisciplinary research is needed to explore the psychological constructs underpinning the TIL programme – attachment, executive function, self-efficacy, and self-esteem. Each of these developmental processes is highly relevant for effective self-management and transition to more independent living. Each is also likely to be impacted by the experiences of separation, maltreatment and adversity. It would be useful to know more about the functioning of care-experienced youth in these domains, and the extent to which mentoring can make a difference.

- **Identifying longer-term benefits**: longitudinal research, both quantitative and qualitative, is needed to identify how young people make use of mentoring at different life stages and what impact mentoring has on longer term educational, employment and social outcomes.

- **Profiling the needs of care leavers**: young people in care and leaving care are not a homogenous group. Their common experience of being in and transitioning out of alternative care is only one aspect of their diverse lives and identities. A more detailed and comprehensive profiling of those leaving care would offer a more nuanced understanding of their needs and inform more customized responses.
• **Understanding the effects of trauma:** there is a need to understand the prevalence and effects of trauma among youth in care and over their life course. This would help inform mental health services and support for transitioning young people and training for those who support them through this transition, including mentors.

• **Disability:** in order to identify ways of making mentoring more fully accessible to disabled youth, it would be important to explore further how disability is conceptualized in the South African context and how the needs of disabled youth are understood within the context of alternative care.

• **Young people’s social ecology:** in order to support care leavers to strengthen social connections and to bolster their help seeking efforts, qualitative inquiry could offer a better understanding of the networks that young people engage with in their day-to-day lives – of their social ecology – and how these natural relationships might be strengthened.

• **Intersectionality:** we found a complex range of intersecting issues for youth leaving care across the domains of race, culture, class, disability and gender. These intersections impact on the experiences of mentoring and of leaving care. Identifying how various dimensions of disadvantage intersect and interact in the lives of care leavers would help inform a more targeted response.

• **Methods:** we suggest that a combination of the following approaches would offer a comprehensive strategy for further researching the contribution of mentoring to the wellbeing of care leavers in South Africa:
  - Engagement with care experienced youth to co-produce a research agenda;
  - A rapid review of mentoring for vulnerable young people in South Africa;
  - A randomised control trial testing most promising mentoring interventions;
  - A longitudinal qualitative enquiry to understand care leavers social ecology and life trajectories; and
  - Utilizing peer researchers who are appropriately trained and equipped. See Kelly et al. (2020) for an example of the use of peer research methods with care leavers in Africa.


“Our role as mentors is to give them tools, equip them, assist them, support them, direct them in terms of achieving, if I can call it, independence, post the exit from care.”
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