

**Implementing E-mentoring with Care-Experienced Youth Under 'Lock-Down' – A South African Experience**

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**Mandi MacDonald**, Queens University Belfast, Email: [m.macdonald@qub.ac.uk](mailto:m.macdonald@qub.ac.uk)

**Andrew Dellis**, SAYes Trust

**Shanaaz Mathews**, Children's Institute, University of Cape Town

**Jenna-Lee Marco**, Stellenbosch University

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**Abstract**

*Purpose:* to describe the challenges and potential benefits of moving a mentoring programme for young people in care and care leavers to an online mode of delivery in response to the South African Government's efforts to curb the spread of the novel coronavirus disease Covid-19.

*Approach:* a descriptive account incorporating reflections from staff responsible for the move to e-mentoring and from South African and UK researchers undertaking an exploratory study of mentoring vulnerable youth at the time when Covid-19 restrictions were imposed.

*Findings:* E-mentoring can provide an effective means to maintaining the essential elements of a well-established mentoring programme for young people in care and care leavers under government enforced 'lock-down'. E-mentoring presents particular challenges and benefits in the South African context. Youth in care and care leavers have unequal access to a digital infrastructure, but this can be overcome by investment in resourcing, equipping and training carers, mentors and mentees. The geographical reach offered by online platforms gives young people access to a more diverse pool of mentors.

*Originality:* Both care leaving services and the use of e-mentoring to meet the needs of vulnerable young people are emerging areas of practice and research interest. This paper brings the two areas together in the context of South Africa under Covid-19 'lock-down' through describing the response of one mentoring programme and highlighting the benefits and challenges.

**Introduction**

There are an estimated 21,000 children and young people living in Child and Youth Care Centres (CYCC) in South Africa (Jamieson, 2017). These are residential group-care facilities, usually run by Non-Governmental Organisations (NGO), providing alternative care for children who have experienced abuse, neglect, abandonment or have been orphaned as defined by South Africa's Children's Act of 2005 (DSD, 2018). It is the responsibility of the CYCC to help young people make the transition to independence when they exit, usually at age 18. Research into the experiences of South African care leavers (van Breda, 2018) suggests that preparation for leaving tends to be ad-hoc and that after-care support is very limited. In that context SAYes, an NGO based in Cape Town, works in partnership with CYCCs to provide volunteer one-to-one mentoring for care leavers. The 'hard lock-down' response of the South African Government to the coronavirus pandemic abruptly put a stop to the programme in March 2020. Conscious that the needs of the young people continued and were possibly intensified, SAYes adapted its programme to provide mentoring on-line.

This viewpoint article describes the SAYes experience of implementing e-mentoring to support care-experienced youth in South Africa and reflects on its lessons so far. At the time that pandemic restrictions were imposed, the authors were undertaking a case study evaluation (Crowe et al 2011) of SAYes's programme, with ethical approval from 'University of Cape Town and Queen's University Belfast. For this paper we have drawn on observational data from field notes generated by the researchers, the SAYes operations director, who adapted the mentoring programme for online platforms and documented the process, and the mentee liaison officer who collated feedback from mentees during weekly support calls. There are limitations inherent in using observational data, in particular the potential for author bias in the selection and interpretation of information. To reduce the risk of bias, data from these diverse informants were brought together, and the paper co-written by academic and practitioner partners.

### **Mentoring care leavers in South Africa**

Young people in residential care in South Africa have typically experienced a range of significant adverse circumstances, including fractured family relationships, and are often placed in communities far from home. When they leave the care of the CYCC, many have limited access to social support, and their aspirations can be undermined by social isolation, and feelings of fear, uncertainty and loneliness (van Breda, 2018). There is, however, no legislative mandate or focused policy framework for after-care support, which is a relatively new, largely under-developed and underfunded area of work (Pinkerton and van Breda, 2019).

In this context, formal mentoring was identified by SAYes as an important supplement to the transitional support provided by CYCCs (<https://sayesmentoring.org/>). This reflects what is recognised from international experience: mentoring can deliver a range of benefits to young people in care and care leavers, including increased emotional wellbeing, sociability, self-confidence, and coping resources (Brady et al, 2019).

SAYes designs, delivers, and supports one-to-one mentorships for young people facing significant life transitions, focusing on young people aged between 14 and 25 years preparing to leave and recently exited from CYCCs. Mentors and mentees meet for nine months, for one hour per week focused around an Individual Transition Plan (ITP) that helps the young person develop decision-making and healthy practices. SAYes transition support specialists resource the matches throughout the year via formal meetings, provision of tools and strategies for personal development, monthly workshops, ad hoc seminars, mentor networking events, and social activities such as an annual sports day. They also liaise closely with the mentees, ensuring their voice is represented at weekly oversight meetings.

Pre-pandemic evaluation of the SAYes programme (MacDonald, 2020) identified that mentoring boosted young people's self-confidence and hope for the future, providing a focus for their motivation and aspirations. It offered mentees a valuable social resource in the form of relationship with a caring adult role model, and some connection to wider social networks. Furthermore, the guidance from their mentor helped young people to identify and maximise opportunities, and to interact differently with the resources available to them. Taken together, and viewed from a framework of ecological resilience (van Breda, 2018), these features of formal mentoring can enable resilience among youth living in and leaving alternative care, which in turn can potentially offer protection in times of significant stress.

### **The South African response to Covid-19**

The South African government, acted swiftly to slow the spread of the Covid-19 pandemic, imposing a nation-wide 'lock-down' in March 2020. This confined all citizens, except those providing essential services, to their home with people only permitted to leave for urgent supplies and medical treatment. Police and army were enlisted to strictly enforce these regulations.

As a consequence of the effects of this hard lock-down on work and earnings, an unprecedented contraction in the South African economy is predicted and is likely to exacerbate already high rates of poverty, unemployment and inequality (Mathe and Maeko, 2020). Despite the gradual re-opening of

the economy, deepening levels of poverty, food insecurity and joblessness are being felt by large sectors of society, all contributing to an escalation in levels of stress and mental health consequences.

The nationally representative COVID-19 Democracy survey reported that 55% of respondents from informal settlements and 66% of township dwellers had no money for food during the initial lockdown, and just over 60% of respondents found it difficult to earn an income and to pay bills (Alexander and Bohler-Muller, 2020). Highlighting the mental health impacts of lockdown identified in the same survey, Roberts (2020) reported that 60% of respondents frequently felt stressed, 46% were scared, a third were depressed (33%), and younger South Africans (18-24 years old) especially reported feelings of boredom and anger. The strongest predictor of psychological distress was hunger, with a third of respondents indicating that “not having enough food to eat” was the worst thing about lock-down. Added to this, social isolation has also reportedly impacted on levels of violence against women and children. The Gender-based Violence Command Centre reported a significant increase in calls, while Childline, a helpline focussed on providing children with support services, received four times as many calls as usual.

In this situation the importance of social and emotional support for care-experienced youth is clear. However, it was this very context that impeded the most valued aspect of the SAYes mentoring, both for young people in care and care leavers: the consistent face-to-face relationship with a trusted caring adult. The restrictions on social life in the face of the Covid-19 pandemic brought the opportunity for this one-to-one engagement to an abrupt end, precisely at a time when it was perhaps most needed.

### **Reflections on e-mentoring care-experienced youth under ‘lock-down’**

The SAYes mentoring programme runs on a one-year cycle which, at the time of lock-down, was in recruitment phase with no active mentorships ongoing. SAYes responded to the pandemic restrictions by reaching out to the 305 care leavers living independently in the community who had previously engaged in the programme. Many were facing significant new challenges including increased food insecurity, illness, caring for sick relatives, job losses, frustrated access to social grants, and mental distress. Calls initially focused on providing immediate support with health information, government regulations, grant support, non-profit food parcel networks, and mental health support, but also gauged interest in the option of mentoring using digital social media.

Mentoring online, also known as e-mentoring involves use of electronic media or distance communication technologies (e.g. text, email, social media) to deliver all or part of the mentoring

relationship. Social and emotional support can be delivered through e-mentoring, but this mode of delivery does present some challenges including the need to ensure access to digital devices, network connectivity and ICT training (O'Conner et al, 2018). To identify and address such issues, SAYes piloted e-mentoring initially with 36 matches. None of the participants had any prior experience of e-mentoring, although 56% of mentors and 40% of mentees had experience with the in-person mentoring programme. As per the programme's normal protocol all were new matches, i.e. mentee and mentor had not previously worked together.

When SAYes proposed the option of e-mentoring to care leavers living independently, almost all were interested. However, this option presented numerous practical challenges. Many young people did not have sophisticated enough devices or sufficient local cellular network signal to reliably handle video calls. This was addressed by providing new cellular phones with dual SIM (Subscriber Identity Module) cards that enabled connectivity to a choice of provider networks, and by helping the mentee to explore their locality for the strongest signal strength. SAYes staff provided mentees with one-to-one training via voice or video call and this, while time intensive, proved valuable in clarifying expectations, addressing questions, and gauging the need for additional support.

Data cost was a particular constraint, with only two mentees having residential WiFi. This highlighted digital inequalities as yet another form of structural inequity for care leavers and presented a specific challenge for e-mentoring. Mentees were provided with a monthly data allowance in excess of what is required for weekly 1-hour video calls with mentors in anticipation that they were likely to use this data to offset boredom and anxiety during lock-down, or to access other support. Given that it is an expensive but useful resource, mentors have been supporting mentees to effectively manage their data use. Even with lowered network charges during lock-down, data costs can be prohibitive, and present a significant impediment to development of e-mentoring programmes.

The pandemic also impacted on mentoring young people still in care as CYCCs restricted site access for volunteers, including mentors. However, having piloted e-mentoring with care leavers, SAYes invited three of their CYCC partners to re-engage in this way. Resources in many of the homes are limited, the majority of young people do not have cellular phones and access to the internet is very restricted. This presented some ethical challenges. Providing e-mentoring only to those with personal cellular phones was unfair, while providing devices and data to some but not all young people within the home would likewise introduce inequity. In addition, there are reasonable safeguarding concerns around cellular phone use and access to the internet. Because, young people

have had limited access, CYCC staff had very little policy making experience or training on online safety protocols.

To offset these challenges, SAYes opted to work more comprehensively with fewer CYCC partners and to buy cellular phones for all young people. Homes were helped to install high speed WiFi, with site monitoring software and a separate access channel to allow for managed use of the internet. SAYes staff also collated best practice from the UK and elsewhere on digital safeguarding, and recommended that the CYCCs appoint an online safety officer who SAYes additionally trained. They also developed training for young people on safe and responsible use of the internet.

While e-mentoring often entails asynchronous communication (Shpigleman, 2014), via email for example, the SAYes model requires mentor and mentee to be jointly present and respond to one another in real time. Indeed, mentees value the sessions most when they are able to see their mentor while speaking to them. A reliable internet service is crucial for facilitating these video calls. Where signal reception is poor, and the mentor opts for a cellular phone call, mentees find it harder to engage and sessions are usually shorter - 30 minutes for a voice call versus an hour on video calls. Coordinating joint meetings, however, can be challenging, as young people manage caregiving and domestic roles, or compete for access to the limited private space within the CYCC.

Mandatory preparatory training for mentors is a core component of the SAYes programme, and is critical to achieving mentee engagement, mentor satisfaction (O'Conner et al, 2018) and can prevent premature endings to matches (Herrera et al, 2013). For e-mentoring, training mentors in the effective use of information communication technology (ICT) is crucial (Kaufman, 2017). However, SAYes advertised for volunteer e-mentors using bespoke video content shared on social media platforms (Instagram, Facebook, Twitter), and this recruitment strategy attracted individuals already comfortable and competent with using ICT, and so more open to the prospect of e-mentoring (Thomas and Ensher, 2013). Mentors' challenges are, therefore, more relational than technological: building rapport and managing emotions in the online environment, particularly for those with prior experience of mentoring.

In-person mentoring often relies on incidental learning occasioned by shared experiences such as outings, with more time for extended conversation and a relaxed approach to goal setting. E-mentoring appears to require more refined mentorship skills applied within a limited and more structured exchange. It involves careful preparation and engagement to agree an agenda and frame the sessions, which tend to be more focused on specific mentoring goals. Mentor training conducted online has been effective and well-attended, but the length of training has had to be

doubled (from 9 to 18 hours) to include extensive role playing and real time feedback on mentorship skills.

Notwithstanding the challenges, e-mentoring has been effective for supporting young people to navigate health information, grants, and benefit payments; negotiate with employers; connect to networks of support; and to reach out to their social resources. With the encouragement of their mentors, some care leavers have even initiated pandemic-related civic action by, for example, raising concerns about the food distribution strategies of inexperienced NGOs and establishing community initiatives for foreign nationals who, until recently, were ineligible for a support grant.

A notable benefit of e-mentoring, for youth in care and care leavers, is that it has extended the geographical reach of the programme. This is particularly beneficial in the context of South Africa where communities largely remain segregated on racial and socio-economic characteristics. For logistical ease (traffic and time considerations) mentors have normally been encouraged to select sites close to their home or place of work. This has made it difficult to recruit mentors for young people living in poorer neighbourhoods that are often also perceived as more dangerous. As e-mentoring is not constrained by geography, the reach of the programme has been expanded to a wider and more diverse pool of volunteers.

## **Conclusion**

This viewpoint paper draws on observational data from researchers and practitioners working in the context of one particular mentoring programme in South Africa and may not be generalisable to other contexts. Nevertheless, this paper shares encouraging reflections on the potential for e-mentoring in resource-constrained settings in a Global South context. Early indications from the SAYes experience in Cape Town suggests that implementing formal mentoring via digital platforms is a viable option for continuing to provide social and emotional support to care-experienced youth during the global pandemic. It has verified that certain known preconditions, necessary for implementing e-mentoring effectively (Shpigelman, 2014), are achievable: giving access to hardware and software; providing knowledge about use of electronic platforms; training in the skills necessary for engaging in technological communication spaces. However, it also cautions that moving from face-to-face to e-mentoring will require investment, the development of policies on online safety specific to context and must not exacerbate existing inequalities.

While e-mentoring has offered a pragmatic solution for continuing this type of support to young people leaving care under the constraints of Covid lock-down, ongoing evaluation is needed to assess the sustainability and efficacy of this approach as a means of opening access to mentoring for vulnerable youth in other situations in both the Global North and South. To ascertain the

acceptability and effectiveness of e-mentoring, further direct engagement with care-experienced young people should be central to the research agenda.

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**Corresponding author**

Mandi MacDonald can be contacted at: [m.macdonald@qub.ac.uk](mailto:m.macdonald@qub.ac.uk)