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## Protocol for preparing youths leaving child and youth care centres in South Africa: Insights from social workers

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### ABSTRACT

There is still limited research on South African youths aging out of residential care, and there is no established protocol to guide social workers in preparing them for independent living. This study aimed to investigate what elements should be included in a protocol for social workers to effectively prepare youths leaving child and youth care centres (CYCCs). A qualitative research method has been used to achieve the aim of this study. Purposive sampling was employed to select seven CYCCs located in Gauteng province, consisting 24 social workers from the West Rand, Sedibeng and Johannesburg District Municipality. Data were collected through semi-structured, individual interviews using a prepared interview guide. The findings of this study highlight the need for the implementation of mandated preparatory protocols, encompassing life skills and healthy living, entrepreneurship skills, computer skills, interpersonal skills, how to integrate within a family, and the availability of after-care services. The study concludes that it is imperative to implement a standardised transition protocol to assist young people who are transitioning out of care. The findings of this study contribute to social work practice and policy development with evidence-based recommendations which can inform national guidelines and enhance service delivery to care leavers.

**Keywords:** care leaving; child and youth care centre; independent living; protocol; youth

## INTRODUCTION

Youths leaving care in South Africa face multiple social challenges as they transition to independent living. In spite of the provisions of the Children's Act 38 of 2005, there is no standardised protocol to guide social workers in preparing youths for leaving care (Republic of South Africa [RSA], 2006). This leaves many care leavers vulnerable and with poor outcomes to succeed in independent living.

This article aims to explore the key elements that should be included in a protocol to support social workers in preparing youths to leave CYCCs.

The article begins with outlining the background to the study, followed by a description of the research methodology, findings and discussion, and concludes with recommendations and conclusions.

## BACKGROUND TO THE STUDY

The Children's Act 38 of 2005 (RSA, 2006) emphasises that children should be raised in a safe and nurturing environment that ensures their growth, development and protection. Unfortunately, this is not always achievable, resulting in many children entering residential care after being separated from their biological families for various reasons. A study conducted by Dickens and Van Breda (2020) indicates that after leaving residential care, many orphans and vulnerable children in Africa often depend on the same family members and community members for support. Consequently, a significant number of these young people eventually experience homelessness.

The 2019 quantitative report by Dickens and Van Breda (2020) described the South African care-leaving landscape in detail, indicating the current statistics on youth in South Africa. It estimated that, there are approximately 21,000 children living in 355 registered CYCCs that are often forgotten amongst the many other vulnerable groups in the country (Dickens & Van Breda, 2020). From the investigation, it was concluded that there are about 73% of youths who are crime-free, 18% who are involved in regular crime and 10% who are engaged in incidental crime (Van Breda & Dickens, 2016a). The investigation further indicated that there is a need for greater attention to be given to interventions focused on youths before they leave care. Gilligan (2019) also notes that care leavers often face complex challenges during the transition to adulthood, requiring support to develop resilience and independence.

Any young person's adjustment to maturity and self-sufficiency can be difficult (Louw & Louw, 2014). The adjustment to life outside of residential care can be even more difficult for youths leaving care (Van Breda & Dickens, 2016a). These authors seem to concur that youths exiting care are a disadvantaged group and frequently lack continued support from responsible caregivers and other adults that they need to effectively transition into adulthood. Woodgate et al. (2017) noted that youths leaving care or those who have left care are more prone to homelessness, substance abuse, early school leaving and conflict with the criminal justice system; additionally, they are more likely to have children at a young age or during adolescence, and run a higher chance of having their child placed in alternative care (Woodgate et al., 2017).

A report by Nicolas (2018) indicated that care leavers continue to be more vulnerable than other young people, since 60% of the children who came into the CYCC did so as a result of maltreatment, abuse and unstable home environments. The lack of support makes them even more vulnerable to all forms of exploitation, especially when they leave the system.

Youths leaving care experience social challenges such as discrimination, lack of independent living skills and emotional distress (Kaasinen et al. 2025; Meyer, 2008; Palmer et al. 2022). Kaasinen et al. (2025) mentioned that care leavers also do not have support systems, which makes it difficult for them to adjust to independent living. Palmer et al. (2022) emphasised the impact of the “care cliff”, where young people are abruptly expected to take on adult responsibilities, but they are not prepared in any way to do so.

Another study confirmed that care leavers lack social and independent living skills, compounding the abrupt termination of social structure and support with a lack of trust and loneliness (Shaw et al., 2020). Social welfare agencies in South Africa have recognised policies and legislations that help youths leaving care as a challenge (Van Breda & Dickens, 2016a). Even the Children's Act 38 of 2005 mandates that services be offered to care leavers at CYCCs; however, there are no regulations outlining the requirements for assisting youths in their transition to independent living (RSA, 2006). This responsibility falls solely on the placement organisations, as they are expected to develop individual development plans (IDP) for youths leaving care (Gamede, 2020).

A mandatory approach to developing guidelines for young people leaving residential care could, therefore, have a positive impact on the transition process (Bond, 2018). Most countries have no recorded data on care leavers after they leave the institution. Care leavers all over the world often face similar challenges (Landerer, 2022). Although there are disparities in systems and resources between countries, these challenges underscore the necessity for structured support programmes to equip young people for independent living (Landerer, 2022). Improving the process of transition for young people leaving care has thus become a key priority for governments internationally, since extended care policies provide support and equip care leavers with life skills (Hlungwani & Van Breda, 2024; Taylor et al., 2021).

However, small-scale research and practice evidence suggest that most of them are either unemployed, temporarily employed, or working in the black market (Harris et al. 2023; Van Breda, 2025). Harder et al. (2020) explain that an effective transition protocol for young people leaving care should help them gain access to further education and stable employment, promote self-determination and advocacy, and strengthen collaboration across the various systems that provide support. They further emphasise the importance of encouraging care leavers to take an active role in community life, including social, recreational, and leisure activities, as part of a holistic transition to adulthood.

Good mental and physical health, the ability to earn money or have the potential to do so, and the capacity to learn marketable skills are all necessary for youths leaving the welfare system to transition successfully (Shaw et al., 2020; Van Breda, 2025). Additional criteria include the ability to live independently and positively contribute to the economy and larger society. In a

study conducted by Moodley et al. (2020), it was found that in South Africa care leavers were not prepared for even basic, daily community life, such as taking public transport, finding their way about, or being able to wake up on their own. They were terrified and concerned about their safety and wellbeing. Their preparation included advice such as “keep away from others in the community” to prevent negative influences (Moodley et al., 2020).

In the last few years, research has been conducted on the need to support young people as they transition to life outside of care (Dickens & Marx, 2020). However, little research has focused on what the content of such a protocol should be (Powers et al., 2018). South Africa has very little information with regard to the specific content or a protocol to guide social workers on how they should prepare youths for leaving care, and the Children’s Act 38 of 2005 is also silent on services that must be delivered to care-leavers (Dickens & Van Breda, 2019). Furthermore, care-leaving research is still in its infancy, highlighting how this vulnerable group is often forgotten (Van Breda & Dickens, 2016a).

Many of these vulnerable youths are at risk, more so than their peers who have family structures (Van Breda & Dickens, 2016b). South Africa’s developmental social welfare approach focuses on a community-based approach rather than residential care; as a result, this neglects the needs of the youths ageing out of residential care in our country (Van Breda & Dickens, 2016a). The gap between what is stated in policies and what actually happens in practice has led to uneven support for young people transitioning to independent living. No research could be found on the need for a specific protocol that social workers can use when they prepare children to leave CYCCs or residential care.

Many CYCCs in South Africa do not have a specific protocol to follow when they prepare care leavers, but instead rely on their discretion (Human, 2021). Gardner (2018) emphasise the importance of appropriate protocols to assist social workers when they are busy with permanency plans and preparing youths for leaving residential care. The current reality is that South African youths in care systems have no strategic plans in place to prepare them before they leave care (Bond, 2018; Shaw, Steyn & Simeon 2020). Hence, this study explored what should be included in a protocol for social workers to prepare youths leaving CYCCs. The methodology used in this study will be discussed next, followed by the research findings and conclusions.

## RESEARCH METHODOLOGY

The study employed a qualitative approach, utilising an exploratory design to achieve its objectives (Braun & Clarke, 2014). Semi-structured, one-on-one interviews with social workers were used to explore what should be included in a protocol for social workers to prepare youths leaving CYCCs.

According to Bakibinga et al. (2019), a sample is recruited from the sampling frame in one of the two general ways, namely probability sampling and non-probability sampling. For this study, non-probability, purposive sampling was utilised. In this study, the researcher purposively selected twenty 24 social workers from seven CYCCs located in Gauteng Province, specifically covering three regions: West Rand, Sedibeng and Johannesburg Metro. The three regions out of five were chosen because of time and financial constraints. They were,

however, appropriately chosen as they have the most registered CYCCs in the Gauteng province, thus forming the sample frame for this study (Prander & Weichbold, 2019).

The researcher adhered to ethical guidelines as approved by the Human Research Ethics Committee (HREC) at the Potchefstroom Campus of the NWU (NWU-000400-23-A1). The researcher ensured that participants were unharmed, participated voluntarily in the study, were not deceived and provided their informed consent. The researcher also ensured their privacy, anonymity and confidentiality. The permission to conduct this study was granted by the Department of Social Development. Goodwill permission was also obtained from the Heads of Departments (HoDs) of the different CYCCs. All the social workers who participated in this study completed an informed consent form before the commencement of the study. Finally, thematic analysis was utilised to analyse the data (Drift & Gardner, 2018).

## RESEARCH FINDINGS

The following themes and sub-themes emerged from the interviews, using a thematic analysis. The findings are supported with the verbatim quotes of the participants and, where relevant, integrated with the relevant literature.

### **Theme 1: No standardised protocol or guidelines to assist social workers when preparing youths for leaving CYCCs**

Most of the participants indicated that they do not have a standardised protocol or guideline that assists them in preparing youths for leaving CYCCs. From the findings it is clear that they use their discretion to prepare these youths. Below are some of their responses:

*No, we don't, it depends on where the child is going after they exit care, we freelance in a way, depending on whether they are going home or to another care facility like the youth living with a disability and then we just prepare them according to that specific environment.* (Participant 2)

*No, our CYCC does not have a guideline that we use to prepare youth to exit the residential care. Each child is unique with a different situation, so social workers use their own discretion to prepare the youth.* (Participant 4)

*No, we don't prepare the children through a standardised protocol for exiting the residential care because we don't have it. Each child is prepared differently according to their needs that have been identified by the social worker.* (Participant 12)

The benefit of a joint protocol allows all welfare practitioners to have a clearer understanding of their roles and responsibilities; strategic planning, monitoring and evaluation alongside the needs of the care leavers are prioritised (Department of Education UK, 2018). The purpose of a protocol is to promote “excellent practice … embed a safe, healthy, nurtured, achieving, respected, responsible and involved process for care leavers” (Scottish Government, 2018:7).

Emerging to adulthood itself is considered a vulnerable stage and leaving care becomes another burden placed on these youths. As a result, if care leavers are ill-prepared for transition, they experience social, health and educational challenges, which sometimes leaves them homeless, involved in crime, unemployed and with inadequate social support systems (especially family

(Shaw et al., 2020; Van Breda, 2025).

### **Theme 2: Independent living programmes and independent development plans**

Although the participants shared that they do not use a standardised protocol to prepare youths for leaving residential care, the majority of the participants indicated that they make use of either independent development plans (IDPs) or independent living programmes (ILPs) to assist them in preparing the youth for exiting care. Some of the verbatim responses are included as follows:

*It is not a policy as such but an ILP that we use to guide us that is currently up and running. Firstly, it includes all children from the age of 14 years and takes into account skills development like computer literacy, life skills programmes addressing topics like self-esteem, leadership and fulfilling their academics to be ready for the outside world.* (Participant 5)

*At the moment we don't have policies being developed at the head office but I have heard that we are currently developing an ILP which will also entail family reunification. At the moment, after admitting the child we do an IDP for each child, and we do believe that family reunification should start immediately if available so they can start engaging with the child. There are also family preservation services, and parental skills offered as part of the programme so that they are ready to accept their child back. We also have events like family open days whereby family interaction is encouraged, so that's basically what we do since we don't have a standardised protocol to guide us.* (Participant 6)

*Actually we don't have such a policy in the organisation. We are just using our knowledge and experience as social workers to prepare children differently and assisted by the IDP that each child has but our focus is mostly on independent living as the child will need these skills when they exit care.* (Participant 8)

*We make use of the IDP to prepare the youth.* (Participant 15)

South African legislation, such as the Children's Act 38 of 2005, emphasises a need for an ILP for youths ageing out of care from a formal setting where alternative care is provided, such as CYCCs (RSA, 2006). In line with this, Mupaku (2024) explains that CYCCs should provide developmental programmes that prepare young people to transition from care, focusing on building the skills needed for independent and interdependent living. This includes a set of social skills designed to prepare the young person in advance for adult life, where they are taught interpersonal skills aimed at helping them interact with the world around them to create structure in their lives.

An IDP, on the other hand, is a tool to assist individuals in their personal development. Its primary purpose is to help individuals reach short- and long-term goals by outlining their needs with the intention to improve in future (Mokgoko, 2021). Successful transition planning requires that the care leaver have comprehensive input into the process (Atkinson & Hyde, 2019; Dudley, 2011). The findings suggest that even though there is no standardised protocol for preparing adolescents to exit residential care, the majority of participants employ independent development plans (IDPs) or independent living programmes (ILPs) to inform the

process. The introduction of IDPs and ILPs is a good practice; however, there is still a need to include young people in the development of such plans, particularly when it concerns their exit from care.

### **Theme 3: Advantages of having a specific guideline or a standardised protocol to prepare youths for leaving CYCCs**

This theme refers to all mentions of why it would be beneficial to have a specific guideline or protocol to assist social workers in preparing youths for leaving residential care. All the participants indicated that a protocol or specific guideline would be helpful to them:

*I think it would be beneficial because sometimes we are also not sure how to assist kids from the CYCCs to be able to know and be prepared for the outside world. (Participant 1)*

*Yes, a protocol can benefit us in terms of guiding us when to start preparing the child, what to focus on during the preparation and to make sure that all aspects of preparation and support are implemented correctly for all children. (Participant 3)*

*A standardised protocol can ensure quality assurance because every organisation will be having a guideline that has an integrated approach touching on all aspects of the child's life holistically instead of each organisation focusing on what they think is a priority for children leaving care. (Participant 18)*

All organisations that are involved in the care leaving process should work together to ensure that care leavers are offered the highest quality support that best suits their individual needs, wishes and circumstances. Practice guidance should, therefore, cover areas of support and guidance which must be implemented while preparing to leave care, through transition or semi-independent living, and after-care adjustment into independent living (Frimpong-Manso, 2012). Care leavers must be well prepared for adult life thus, a protocol can assist social workers in this regard (Tanur, 2012). The findings indicated that the implementation of a standardised protocol to assist in the preparation of youths who are leaving CYCCs is firmly supported by the participants.

### **Theme 4: Challenges that youths experience after they exit care**

This theme describes the challenges that youths experience after they exit the CYCC. Care leavers face a range of challenges following their departure from care, ranging from being homeless, unemployed, lack of finances (especially to study further) and absence of family support. Research has shown that young people become highly vulnerable to challenges once they leave care because, at this stage, institutional factors of age limits force them to transition and hopefully become stable, but this often results in poor outcomes in health, education, housing, employment and relationships for many (Sekibo, 2019). Other high-risk behaviours such as unplanned pregnancies, substance abuse and even prostitution are an additional issue for youths when they age out of care. Interdependence, substance abuse, mental health problems, crime, school dropouts and teenage pregnancies were identified as sub-themes (Camargo et al., 2020; Gonzalez-Guarda et al., 2015). The following sub-themes present the challenges experienced by youths after exiting the residential care.

### ***Sub-theme 4.1 Lack of independent living skills***

The participants indicated that young people leaving CYCCs struggle with independent living skills. Here are some examples of what they said:

*They struggle with independent living skills after care leaving. (Participant 5)*

*Suddenly they have to be an adult, make their own choices regarding every aspect of their lives, they struggle with that. (Participant 10)*

Research by Arnau-Sabatés and Gilligan (2020) revealed that many young people leaving care continue to face significant challenges in early adulthood, and that supportive relationships in the workplace play an important role in improving their overall well-being and adjustment. Youth leaving care often face serious challenges in early adulthood, and supportive relationships in key environments such as the workplace can play an important role in improving their overall well-being and adjustment (Arnau-Sabatés & Gilligan, 2020). South African research further indicates that many young people leaving residential care struggle to secure stable housing and therefore prefer to return home to be with their families, as they are unable to cope with the difficulties of finding accommodation (Bond, 2010; Wilson & Mokgoko, 2024). These housing challenges also result in some youths exiting care choosing to cohabit with their partners.

Developing independent living skills is necessary before leaving care. These include academic support, career preparation, budget and financial management (budgeting, responsible spending and paying bills), job-seeking skills, religion and family support. Youths also need to have a basic grasp of personal care, such as practising good personal hygiene (bathing and laundry), cooking and eating healthy, exercising, understanding the dangers of substance abuse and knowing when to seek medical help. Difficulties with personal care can have an impact on social and work relationships (Florida Administrative Code, 2019).

Van Breda and Frimong-Manso's (2020) findings illustrate that young people need to transition through a structured process that prepares them for managing the demands of the adult world outside care. Dickens and Marx (2020:70) argue that young people should be given the chance to improve their employability by learning practical skills such as "plumbing, electrics, motor maintenance, and building". These recommendations are crucial for young people receiving after-care, because this could give them a feeling of community that will help them manage the transition. Practical skills and basic living skills could also give young people the knowledge they need to achieve their goals and boost their confidence to face any obstacles that may arise (Van Breda & Dickens, 2016a). The findings revealed that young people who leave CYCCs struggle with independent living skills, making it difficult for them to manage daily duties and transition to adulthood. The findings further revealed that without adequate preparation in areas such as financial management, job-seeking, personal care and practical skills, many care leavers face challenges in securing stable housing, employment and overall wellbeing.

### ***Sub-theme 4.2 Substance abuse***

Emerging adulthood is a difficult time for many people, especially those with substance abuse problems. The findings indicated that youths would start experimenting with substances

because they cannot cope with life demands outside the CYCC. These findings are supported by the following direct quotes:

*They don't know how to survive outside so they turn to substances. (Participant 5)*

*Substance abuse is a big problem under our care leavers, I think they struggle to cope. (Participant 8)*

Alderson et al. (2019) draw attention to the fact that care leavers are more likely to misuse drugs and alcohol, which is seen as a public health and social issue. Moreover, two thirds of care leavers were found to be involved in substance use, which was seen as an enabler that led to several other issues with their everyday lives, health and general wellbeing. Smoking and drug usage were reported to be among the issues influencing care leavers.

Thus, multidisciplinary cooperation should be promoted to prevent the development of risky behaviours among care leavers. Since emerging adulthood is a difficult time for many people, it could be even more challenging for those with substance abuse problems, who are at a higher risk during this time (Cadigan et al., 2019). A research study conducted by Goodman et al. (2016) demonstrated the impact of substance abuse on developing youths. The study reveals that many of them saw a direct connection between their transition to adulthood and substance abuse, with some able to realise that substance use prevented them from becoming fully adult, in this way promoting their maturity by increasing self-reflection and personal development.

#### ***Sub-theme 4.3 Mental health problems***

The participants mentioned that many of the youths leaving care already struggled with mental health problems before entering residential care as a result of abuse, abandonment and neglect. These challenges are particularly concerning in the context of education, as Zajac et al. (2023) found that poor mental health is strongly associated with higher dropout rates in higher education, highlighting the need for targeted mental health support for vulnerable young people, including care leavers. Furthermore, the high rates of substance abuse in emerging adults are often the result of co-occurring mental health disorders (Richert et al., 2020). Some of the participant responses supported these findings:

*I don't know how these children survive, many of them struggle with mental health problems. (Participant 6)*

*Some of our youth have mental health issues because they were traumatised before in their lives. (Participant 8)*

*I don't think coping will be easy outside the CYCC for them; they sometimes struggle emotionally and have mental health problems. (Participant 10)*

Many youths were removed from their family homes because of abuse or neglect, meaning that they possibly experienced physical, emotional or psychosocial trauma; these have negative effects on a child's mental and behavioural health. Therefore, they could still be dealing with the fallout of their trauma whilst simultaneously needing to leave care (Rahamim & Mendes, 2015). According to Sheppard (2022), maltreatment in the early stages of life can also be a risk factor for mood disorders, anxiety disorders, personality disorders and severe depression.

Gonzalez et al. (2015) point out that we still do not fully understand *why* so many young people leaving care experience poor outcomes. However, they note that national birth organisations highlight mental health as a possible key factor that shapes how well these young people adjust later in life.

Youths in care go through a multitude of complex issues when being placed in care, which suggests that their mental wellbeing is already compromised. Furthermore, the participants indicated that children in residential care have been found to have more mental health problems compared to those in family-type foster care or kinship placements (Akister et al., 2010). The findings showed that a large number of young people who leave CYCCs had mental health problems, which are frequently brought on by prior trauma, abuse and neglect. They struggle to deal emotionally and adjust to independent living because of these difficulties, which are exacerbated by the trauma of leaving care.

#### ***Sub-theme 4.4 Crime***

This theme was mentioned by some participants. They mentioned that youths leaving care are more vulnerable to committing a crime:

*They don't know how to survive outside, then they end up committing crimes. (Participant 3)*

*I have heard many stories of our children leaving the care of the CYCC and ending up in jail, I don't know why. (Participant 12)*

*They don't have any support outside, so what do they do, they steal to survive, get caught and end up in prison. (Participant 14)*

This finding is in line with findings in the literature, namely that there is an over-representation of care leavers in the criminal justice system (Fitzpatrick et al., 2017). The high rate of unemployment among young people leaving CYCCs can have detrimental effects on their lives, ultimately causing them to turn to illegal activities such as committing crimes (Van Breda, 2020). This result addresses the financial vulnerability that the care leavers experience daily in terms of being without food, having to rely on family, having no income, and not understanding how to use a bank account (Dickens & Marx, 2020). Furthermore, even when youths leaving care receive support to continue their education, many still struggle to participate fully in projects or programs due to financial constraints and social challenges (Dickens & Marx, 2020).

Carr and McAlister (2016) identified three factors that explain why care leavers become involved in criminal activity. First, the terrible surroundings they live in make them more likely to commit crimes; second, the treatment they receive may be criminogenic; and third, the stage of transitioning to maturity is sometimes hurried or compressed, making young people more susceptible to unfavourable consequences. Crime prevention activities are therefore recommended to be a component of the planning for care leavers.

An independent review launched by the Prison Reform Trust, an independent UK charity, sought to investigate why children in care are five times more likely to commit crimes. The findings outline that many young women in prisons who have spent time in care are highly

vulnerable, have mental health needs, are emotionally damaged, neglected, and have a drug and alcohol addiction – all of this can lead to involvement in crime (Gooch et al, 2022). These findings also highlight the fact that children are taken into care because of abuse or neglect, which results in an anger that they do not know how to handle, which suggests that their offending behaviour is actually attention-seeking behaviour (Seabrook, 2015).

#### ***Sub-theme 4.5 Unplanned pregnancy***

Unplanned pregnancies were also mentioned by some of the participants.

*Unplanned pregnancy is a big concern amongst care leavers. (Participant 5)*

*After leaving care, they usually get pregnant. (Participant 7)*

This subtheme clearly demonstrates that unintended pregnancy is a major issue among care leavers. This is generally due to a lack of support, financial insecurity and emotional vulnerability. Many care leavers engage in risky sexual behaviour, which can lead to unintended pregnancies. Care leavers typically decide to go through with their unplanned pregnancies for two reasons: either they do not know where to get help with termination, or they are trying to use parenting as a way to make up for the emotional fulfilment they did not receive in their childhood (Fallon & Broadhurst, 2015).

More than twice as many young adults who have aged out of care – especially women – engage in risky sexual behaviours when compared to other young adults (Karki et al., 2023). Seeking financial help from a lover might lead to unintended pregnancies, sexually transmitted infections (STIs) or even human immunodeficiency virus/acquired immunodeficiency syndrome (HIV/AIDS), which can have a far harsher impact on the individual. Teenage mothers are also more vulnerable to stress and postpartum depression. Other challenges include lack of support, criticism of their parenting skills and social stigma (Kingston & Knight, 2021). Inadequate supervision has also been posited as a contributing factor to teenage pregnancy upon release from care. For example, a participant in Kingston and Knight's (2021) study mentioned being more vulnerable because she had returned to her home where she had been neglected. According to Oelofsen (2015), youths in care were provided with financial support; however, there were limitations attached, such as the possibility of support being withheld in the event of childbirth. This issue caused some youths to leave care to move in with their partner.

#### **Theme 5: Need for a protocol or specific guideline**

All of the participants indicated that there is a need for a specific guidelines or a protocol. They identified seven aspects to be included in such a protocol or guideline to assist social workers in preparing youths for leaving residential care. These are discussed in the sub-themes below.

#### ***Sub-theme 5.1 Life skills and healthy living***

The participants indicated that life skills training and how to live a healthy lifestyle should be included in a protocol/guideline to assist social workers in preparing youths for leaving residential care. This includes basic life skills such as personal hygiene, budgeting and how to work with money, positive thinking and house chores:

*I think there should be a protocol and it should include basic things like how to care for themselves, financial mentoring so that when they get a job, they can balance social life and work. (Participant 2)*

*Healthy living must also be included where topics like contraceptives, STIs, healthy diets, mental health and many more can be discussed to make the youth aware before they get to experience them. (Participant 13)*

*The youth should be prepared with basic life skills such as positive thinking, a healthy lifestyle and future planning. They must be reminded that they are no longer going to be in the CYCC, so they need to plan for their future. (Participant 17)*

The findings emphasise the necessity for a defined protocol or guideline to assist social workers in preparing young people to leave residential care. Participants stressed the importance of life skills training, such as personal cleanliness, financial literacy, healthy living and planning for the future in providing care leavers with the tools they need to live independently and be mentally healthy. Life skills education is an effective psychosocial intervention strategy for promoting the positive social and mental health of adolescents (Madsen, 2023). It appears that life skills are frequently perceived as the answer to the difficulty of being a young person who struggles with or suffers from mental health issues. As a result, having a protocol or guidelines that incorporate life skills will enhance the process of transition for care leavers who struggle with social and mental health issues.

#### ***Sub-theme 5.2 Entrepreneurship skills***

It was clear from the findings that the participants felt that entrepreneurship skills are important aspects that should form part of a protocol/guidelines to prepare youths for leaving residential care. Some verbatim responses included:

*Most importantly, they must be taught on how to become a businessperson, e.g. there are those with a passion in farming, sewing etc. This will help them open their own businesses because we can all agree that it is not always possible for them to get jobs. (Participant 8)*

*Nowadays it is not easy to get a job, so I think teaching them to be business-minded could help a lot so that if they cannot find a stable job then they have something that can assist them to earn a living. (Participant 18)*

*They need to have skills and knowledge on how to start their own business and they further need to be computer literate. Entrepreneurship skills is important because not all of them can get jobs in the market but they do have skills to be able to run business that can sustain them. (Participant 20)*

The findings indicate the participants' strong conviction that entrepreneurship skills should be incorporated in the guidelines for youths transitioning out of residential care. They underlined that providing care leavers with business and financial skills – such as farming, sewing and computer literacy – would enable them to start their own firms, especially given the difficulties in finding conventional employment. Recent studies have demonstrated the importance of entrepreneurial education, which aims to teach individuals how to start a new firm. This is vital

for the economic and social development of South Africa, as entrepreneurship drives economic growth and job creation (Omoniyi & Bongani, 2022). Thus, entrepreneurial skills will benefit not only the care leavers, but people around them through job creation and the country's economic growth in general.

#### ***Sub-theme 5.3 Computer literacy***

As much as the entrepreneurship skills are important, understanding how to operate computers and navigate the internet empowers individuals to access information, resources and many other opportunities. This is how some participants responded:

*Computer skills are also important because nowadays we are more on technology than on paper. They should know how to use a computer, so that they can type their CVs and stand a better chance to get jobs. (Participant 15)*

*They need to have skills and knowledge on how to start their own business and they further need to be computer literate. Entrepreneurship skills is important because not all of them can get jobs in the market but they do have skills to be able to run business that can sustain them. (Participant 20)*

The findings demonstrated the value of computer literacy in educating young people for independent life; it helps them to access information, identify career opportunities and navigate the digital world. Participants emphasised the need for computer skills for tasks such as CV writing, business startup and boosting overall employability in an increasingly technologically driven culture. According to Olney, Bakhtiari, Greenberg and Graesser (2017), adults with low literacy levels can benefit greatly from adopting learning technology to improve their reading abilities, but they also tend to have limited computer literacy. As technology advances, it has a great impact on people's lives. Computers are among the most outstanding technological devices which become part of daily routines; as a result, computer skills should be improved to enable care leavers to become technologically proficient and to prevent the prospect negative situations in the career (Ciampa, 2013).

#### ***Sub-theme 5.4 Interpersonal skills***

This sub-theme refers to the importance of interpersonal skills. The participants mentioned that this is especially important, because youths leaving care have to integrate into a community where good interpersonal skills are important:

*Interpersonal skills are important because no human being is an island and can survive alone. (Participant 12)*

*They need good interpersonal skills; they need to be able to communicate their needs effectively. (Participant 13)*

*They need good relationship skills, they need to know about teamwork and how to be caring towards others. (Participant 18)*

*They need to be able to communicate, listen and have empathy towards others, they further need good people skills to survive in the community. (Participant 20)*

Interpersonal skills are important as none of us live in a bubble. People must communicate daily and good interpersonal skills ‘oil the wheels’ of these interactions, making them smoother for all those involved. They allow us to build better and longer-lasting relationships, both at home and at work (Zhang, 2018). Communication skills, emotional intelligence, teamwork, conflict resolution or mediation, problem-solving or decision-making, persuasion and influencing skills are all interpersonal skills recognised by England and Morgan (2012). These skills assist in being able to understand and manage one’s own (and others) emotions, whilst being able to work with others and in groups, especially towards problem-solving, conflict management and decision making. According to Rajesh and Chandrasekaran (2014, p23), strong interpersonal skills help us “navigate difficult conversations, build trust and establish long-lasting connections” with those around us, whether at home, work or in the community. A study in California highlights that people who are more socially connected have a habit of living longer and healthier lives when compared to those who are socially isolated. For that reason, youths leaving care should have access to a variety of social and recreational opportunities, as this will assist them to create and maintain supportive and positive relationships with people they love and make them feel like part of the community (Zhang, 2018). The findings showed the importance of interpersonal skills in helping youths transitioning from residential care to the community. Participants confirmed the importance of developing effective communication, teamwork, empathy and connection for personal and professional success. These skills help care leavers cross social interactions, form meaningful relationships and successfully integrate into society.

#### ***Sub-theme 5.5 How to integrate within a family***

The participants suggested that youths leaving residential care must be prepared on how to integrate within a family environment.

*They need to know what will be expected of them in a family environment. (Participant 8)*

*Family reunification should be part of preparation because family support plays an important role in every human being's life unless there is no family at all that can be traced. Then taking care themselves, being able to spend wisely and prioritise the needs over the wants in everything they plan to do. (Participant 10)*

*Remember these kids are not used to being at home, some of them stayed at the CYCC since they were very small, it is important that they need to know what to expect back at home. Discussions on this can really help them to ease more comfortable to their new environment. (Participant 11)*

Care leavers have often experienced many biographical ruptures and discontinuities and, in some cases, turning back towards the family can lead to the re-enactment of family conflicts and critical events (Sting & Groinig, 2020), or to the care leavers themselves breaking off contact. When there is a definitive break with the family of origin, it is generally preceded by experiences of rejection and disappointment, neglect, traumatisation or emotional abuse (Wade, 2008). Family relationships have been recognised as “identity capital” (Mann-Feder & Goyette, 2019) and as an important element of “social capital” that predicts positive outcomes and resilience in the status passage of leaving care (Van Breda & Dickens, 2016a). According

to Sting and Groinig (2020, p. 147), "care leavers should be supported to maintain relationships with people who are important to them, for example, family, friends, former carers and professionals." Having strong social networks that they can rely on for support will also be an advantage for them, especially so that they do not experience loneliness and isolation. Family reintegration should involve case management throughout reintegration and family strengthening as implementation techniques. Case management ensures that support is tailored to the unique strengths, needs and circumstances of the child and family. It helps families access multisectoral family strengthening services and ensures these services are delivered in a coordinated manner to enhance the child and their family's coping skills and resilience and promote greater autonomy, safety, community belonging and wellbeing. Furthermore, family strengthening addresses the risks and builds protective factors with families at risk of separation or re-separation (MacArthur & Woodman, 2018).

The findings underline the necessity of preparing young people who have left residential care for family reunification, as many had spent years away from their families. Participants emphasised the need of understanding family expectations, financial management, and emotional adjustment. Given the problems that care leavers may face, such as past family conflicts and discontinuities, it is critical that structured support and case management are provided to assist them in developing and maintaining meaningful relationships, reducing isolation, and strengthening their sense of belonging within a family and community.

#### ***Sub-theme 5.6 Linking youth leaving care with resources/job opportunities***

Leaving care should not mean one is left without support. After-care services have been developed to help youths take their next, confident steps towards independent living. The participants interviewed agreed that youth leaving care should be linked to the provision of resources that can assist them during and after their transition stage:

*What stands out for me is being able to link the youth to job or business opportunities as part of the exit program because remember that they have no idea where to start when it comes to looking for employment. Others might have completed studying but unable to network for the right opportunities. (Participant 9)*

*Our ILP covers a lot of other topics except linking the youth to resources for job opportunities, so I think all that is in the programme together with that can be added as part of the protocol to prepare children when they exit care. (Participant 17)*

*Linking the youth to both private and government institutions for learnerships and job opportunities should be a priority as part of preparation because most of these youth are easily influenced to criminal activities because they have nothing to do at home. (Participant 24)*

It is important to empower youths with knowledge of the available resources that can assist them to live independent lives. A recent research study shows that youths leaving care in South Africa were concerned that they do not have information on how to apply for further education and training, or for university entrance, as well as the different types of funding sources that are available for them (Gilligan, 2019). Furthermore, these youths are not aware of the available

learnerships and internship programmes or employment opportunities that can assist them in achieving sustainable livelihoods. The youths stated that they wish to access resources that can help them face life challenges (Van Audenhove & Vander Laenen, 2017).

Part 3, regulation 8 of the Care Leavers (England) Regulations (United Kingdom, 2010) maintains that young people in care should have personal advisors with whom they share a positive relationship until they reach the age of 25. These personal advisors will ensure the coordination of the agencies and addressing each need identified in the pathway plan. They will continue to guarantee that each care leaver has access to the appropriate services and necessities to enable them to develop financial competency (Care leaver's Regulations, 2010). The findings underline the necessity of preparing young people leaving residential care for family reunification, as many had spent years away from their families. Participants mentioned the importance of understanding family expectations, financial management and emotional adjustment. Given the problems that care leavers may face, such as past family conflicts and discontinuities, structured support and case management are critical for assisting them in developing and maintaining meaningful relationships, reducing isolation, and strengthening their sense of belonging within a family and community.

#### ***Sub-theme 5.7 Availability of care services***

All the participants indicated the importance of after-care services for youths who leave residential care. They further stated that the youths should be prepared beforehand regarding the availability of after-care services, so that they know who to contact should the need arise:

*Continued monitoring of the child together with his/her family should also be part of the protocol because the family can also revert to a place of vulnerability and make things even worse. (Participant 13)*

*I don't think it's fair to just let the children go back to their families and then just forget about them. They should have access to after-care services, it is something I feel strongly about. (Participant 15)*

*Our government needs to think about after-care service for children leaving care, what if they don't fit into the family, some of these children did not have any family ties, now what if they don't find a job? What will happen to them? A protocol must include the availability of after-care services. (Participant 19)*

After-care services are provided to young people who are leaving care to improve their life prospects as they make the transition to independent living. Regulations in Northern Ireland support the provision of after-care services for children leaving care, emphasising the review of pathway plans, functions of personal advisers and the assistance young people will receive with education, training and accommodation (Collins & Pinkerton, 2008; Kelly et al., 2022).

After-care assistance for care leavers may include information and advice about other government or non-government agencies which can help with family searching, family mediation and family reunion services. These services can also include assisting youths to apply for financial assistance and referrals for finding accommodation, education or vocational training, counselling, employment, legal advice, health services or professional services

(Collins & Pinkerton, 2008; Kelly et al., 2022).

The findings show how important after-care services are for helping young people make the move from residential care to independent life. In order to make sure they know where to turn for assistance, if necessary, participants underlined that care leavers should be made aware of the after-care services that are available beforehand. The obstacles that young people may encounter – such as family reintegration issues, joblessness and a lack of support systems – were brought up. In order to foster stability and wellbeing, effective after-care services should include ongoing monitoring, financial aid, emotional support, and access to school and career prospects.

## DISCUSSION OF FINDINGS

The findings from the interviews with participants revealed that there is no protocol available to assist youths leaving residential care. Although the participants mentioned that they used ILPs and IDPs, it is clear that this is not enough to fully equip the youths for care leaving. The findings further indicated that a standardised protocol would be more beneficial. Several challenges were identified for the youth after leaving care. These include i) struggling with interdependence; ii) experimentation with substances and substance abuse issues; iii) mental health problems; iv) involvement in crime; and v) teenage pregnancy. These findings suggest a critical gap in the support structures for youths aging out of care. The absence of a unified, evidence-based protocol leaves social workers uncertain about how best to prepare these youths, contributing to inconsistent practices and poor post-care outcomes. The seven elements identified for inclusion in a future protocol reflect an integrated approach to equipping care leavers for adulthood – one that addresses both practical and psychosocial needs. The challenges reported by participants also highlight how vulnerable this group is during transition, and how the lack of preparation heightens their risk of marginalisation.

The Figure 1 shows all the aspects that should be covered in a protocol to prepare youths for care-leaving, according to the participants.



*Figure 1: Aspects to be covered by the protocol*

The researcher concurs that all these aspects, as illustrated in Figure 1, are issues that youths should be prepared for when leaving the care of a CYCC. Care leavers should be assisted to develop the life skills and confidence they need to become independent and successful adults.

The findings are consistent with research in South Africa and globally. For example, Shaw et al. (2020) and Van Breda (2025) both emphasise the lack of preparation for youths exiting care and the resulting vulnerabilities. The themes of lacking life skills, emotional support and post-care planning mirror those reported by Dickens and Marx (2020), who found that many youths are ill-equipped for basic adult responsibilities. This study also supports findings by Moodley et al. (2020) and Landerer (2022), which call for structured, youth-centred interventions during the care-leaving process. In contrast to countries with established protocols (e.g., the UK's Pathway Plans), South Africa's policy vacuum places these youths at heightened risk, confirming the need for a nationalised protocol.

Based on these findings, it is evident that equipping youths with practical life skills is critical for their successful transition out of care. Educating youths about budgeting will make it easier for them to manage their own money and learning to cook healthy meals will help them look after themselves and stay healthy (Shaw et al., 2020; Starr et al., 2024). Some research demonstrates that programmes that incorporate personal development and independent living skills into leaving care services positively influence young people's educational achievement, employment, housing, health and other life skills (Göllner et al., 2021). Finally, computer skills are becoming increasingly important. Most jobs now require at least some basic understanding of computers, and those who do not have these skills may find it challenging to find employment. With so many different ways to use computers, it is essential to have at least a basic understanding of how they work, and computer skills may also benefit those care leavers who want to start their own businesses (Leonard et al., 2019).

These findings align with a growing body of national and international literature highlighting the urgent need for structured support during the care-leaving process. The study is underpinned by a developmental and resilience-based perspective, which emphasises the importance of gradual, supported transitions into adulthood. The findings contribute to care-leaving literature by identifying core components of a prospective transition protocol within the South African context. This helps to bridge the gap between theory and practice and offers a foundation for future research to test and refine these elements. The study also challenges the adequacy of current policy frameworks (e.g., the Children's Act 38 of 2005) and calls for their revision to explicitly include post-care preparation requirements.

## **LIMITATIONS**

This study has a number of shortcomings in spite of its findings. A small sample size was used; this may hinder the ability to accurately reflect the range of experiences that care leavers have. Qualitative data were used, which may be subjective and difficult to generalise, even when they are detailed. The study further focused on participant viewpoints within a particular geographic area, which might not accurately reflect more general national or global patterns.

## **RECOMMENDATIONS**

The following recommendations are based on the research findings obtained through interviews with the participants.

- A protocol or guidelines that invest in interpersonal skills will add value to the youths leaving care, whose goal is to transition and reintegrate into society at large, as these skills are essential for success in both personal and professional settings (Doucet *et al.*, 2022). All children in care facilities should have a pathway plan based on their individual needs that sets out the support that will receive once they have left care to assist them, for example, in integrating into the family. They should also be aware of the availability of after-care services.
- Standardised protocols should be developed with the above-mentioned aspects to assist social workers in preparing youths for leaving care.
- More similar research studies on a larger scale should be done in the other provinces of South Africa so that the phenomenon is better understood.
- Social workers should be trained on exit programmes that are monitored afterwards to ensure the best services for care leavers.
- More specific guidelines are needed from legislative documents such as the Children's Act 38 of 2005 on the preparation of care leavers.

## CONCLUSIONS

The results of this study demonstrated a critical gap in the preparation of youths leaving CYCCs in South Africa. The fact that there are no standardised protocols or guidelines contributes to inconsistent support and poor outcomes, including substance abuse, mental health issues and unemployment. A protocol is urgently needed, one that addresses both practical skills and psychosocial support. By equipping youths with essential life skills, South Africa can better support their transition into independent living and reduce their risk of marginalisation.

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