

STRENGTHENING YOUTH WORK PRACTICE WITH AND FOR CHILDREN ON THE MOVE IN ALTERNATIVE CARE



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The purpose of this reflective paper is to share learnings from the experience as child and youth care practitioners supporting the development of children and young people that have moved to South Africa from other African countries and having experienced various forms of vulnerability. The hope is to offer a contribution to the growing support for the development, inclusion, care and protection of children and young people on the move in South Africa.

UNDERSTANDING THE LIVED REALITIES OF MIGRANT CHILDREN ON THE MOVE IN ALTERNATIVE CARE

The whole picture

All children and young people have their own life stories and the support provided towards their care should be based on the individuality of circumstances, hopes, aspirations, and how their lives uniquely come into contact with structures of inequality. There are specific experiences of exclusion and insecurity that children and young people on the move are navigating that need to be considered in child and youth work practice. In our practice we are committed to 'starting where young people are starting'; what this means for children and young people on the move is finding starting points in relation to the whole picture of their lives. And this is challenging because not only do they try to make sense of being in a Child and Youth Care Centre (CYCC), and of the complex circumstances that have led to their placement there, but they also have to adapt to a new country, often with uncertain legal status and with limited access to social and economic resources. In addition, older children need to deal with the transition to becoming teenagers and hence cope also with physical and emotional changes.

Trust

Many children on the move who find themselves in alternative care have experience of losing key care-based relationships and attachment, to both people and place, has been disrupted. This means that they have often lost the main reference points that help to build safety, a sense of identity and belonging, self and future. This causes disconnection to self, others and culture. Trust with adults and professionals has also been lost through harmful interactions with adults related to the conflict, violence and extreme poverty that underpinned their need to move. This fracturing of trust is also amplified by abuses of power experienced during the migration journey, and in relation to the immigration regime in the context where they were seeking safety. Child and youth care workers (CYCWs) have an integral role to play to intervene in these cycles of harm, and to shift these children's experience towards healing, development and secure futures through creating a place where children feel safe and connected.

EVOLUTION OF YOUTH WORK PRACTICE SUPPORTING CHILDREN ON THE MOVE

Lawrence House CYCC

Lawrence House is a child and youth care centre that specialises in the care and protection of unaccompanied migrant children and separated refugee minors since 2005. It was opened to address the specific need for child appropriate accommodation for a number of abandoned migrant and refugee children who were living at the Ark Shelter in Mfuleni, Cape Town. Lawrence House is a project of the Scalabrini Centre of Cape Town. A series of developmental and therapeutic services are offered to ensure children and youth overcome trauma previously experienced and are equipped with the necessary social and emotional skills to manage themselves and their environments once they are reintegrated into the community.

Hierarchy of Needs

Lawrence House is committed to supporting children and young people in their healing and recovery journey, and takes a continuous learning approach to reflecting on, evaluating and improving practice. The journey shared here

reflects the experience of the journey that Lawrence House has been on; the evolution of the practice can be seen in relation to Maslow's Hierarchy of Needs (1954). This structure provides a framework through which to both make sense of our practice, but also to challenge and expand our work in ways that continuously centres the self-actualisation of the children and young people we work with. Importantly however, this is not about using the framework in a way that individualises the children and young person, or puts responsibility on them alone to address their needs, but to engage with the children and young persons holistically and collaboratively across the levels of change needed to support long-term changes in their lives. In fact, as an example we apply the "dance of change", a concept developed by Mamelani Projects (www.mamelani.org.za), our partner organization. In the journey with the young people, child and youth care workers walk in front of, alongside or behind the young person, according to where the young person is in the moment. This movement of support allows the young person to lead his or her own process towards independence.

PHASE 1: PHYSIOLOGICAL AND SAFETY NEEDS - FOCUS ON CARE AND SURVIVAL NEEDS

Building emotional and physical safety

Our starting point was a commitment to meeting the basic needs of children and young people on the move, ensuring their care and protection in a safe place with routines and structured support. The foundation of our practice was to ensure that children's physiological and safety needs were met. This was not just about ensuring these needs were cared for, but about re-establishing dignity within a child or young person. Having their own space and room that they could call their own, having belongings, being able to change their clothes if they no longer fitted them, showering with hot water, and having a routine where they could grow a sense of stability, for example in having three meals a day. Children and youth are actively involved in maintaining a clean and hygienic physical environment, therefore the daily and weekly chores, like cleaning the bathroom, the kitchen, the house duties are shared among the residents. Often children and youth are also involved in cooking and the kitchen becomes a space where stories are shared, feelings are expressed, memories are recalled. This contributes to creating a sense of warmth, a sense of home and the body can reexperience safety and nurturing.

Children's physiological needs are of course deeply connected to their safety needs. Importantly, we understand this as both emotional and physical safety. Feeling protected and knowing that there are security measures in place in terms of who can enter the CYCC or for instance the privacy of having a room of your own. Physical safety relates to the health of the children and experiencing access to health services. Keeping oneself and others safe in the CYCC is also supported by a sense of containment promoted through a clear set of rules, that are understood and communicated clearly, and with openness for feedback. As with physiological needs, predictability and consistency drive feelings of safety. Being able to count on procedures, routines and boundaries and know whatever consequences are created will be maintained, is important to offset the sense of unpredictability and uncertainty that many traumatized children feel. Additionally, informing them when things change, and even involving them in the change process, helps children and youth to adjust to change by being part of it and at the same time, it gives them time to process and understand the change.

Emotional and psychological safety is also a central principle in our work, aiming for children to feel listened to, without judgment. We must work on supporting children to feel

safe enough to share, and shift our practices to support this. It is important to acknowledge children's feelings. Encourage them to express their needs and feelings, provide acknowledgement for their actions, regardless of how their expressions are handled, and provide opportunities to successfully self-regulate their behaviours in productive ways. The more they feel that they can be engaged in outcomes that affect them the more trust is built.

We have also learnt that supporting the realisation of wider rights, notably education, provides a deeper sense of safety. Education is a significant concern for many children and young people on the move, and to show a commitment to their future and their longer term integration into their new society can be transformative.

Creating a sense of welcome

How we welcome a young person into a CYCC is critical; in fact welcoming is more than just an action, it is an intentional methodology. This first impression goes a huge way to helping children on the move feel a part of this home. "People will never forget how you made them feel". Children are welcomed to speak their language whilst they are building their comfort, recognising their identity and supporting them to be themselves. This also facilitates a step towards trust with staff and other children. We have an orientation process, where children are engaged with directly on their integration in Lawrence House. A first check in from the child and youth care worker is done in a caring and protective way, to understand the basic needs of the child. Verifying if there is a need for cleaning the clothes he or she came with, or giving new clothes because those in the bag aren't enough, or too small, giving toiletries. All this gives dignity to the child. They feel someone attends to their needs and sees them. During the orientations process the child will have a tour of the house and understands the different spaces, communal and private, and is informed about the rules and policies of the house. Within just a couple of weeks they are also given a responsibility or duty so that they feel a part of the community.

"I was shown around the house, then they showed my bedroom and that was exciting because it was the first time that my brother and I really had our own room. I remember I only had one pair of shoes, old fashion shoes; I was trying to hide them. And when my brother and I were sitting in the lounge watching TV, we heard the other kids coming back from school and they started watching us. But then some of them could speak Swahili, because we had a language barrier, they came to speak to us.

I guess we weren't very engaging... but after lunch, the guys were playing soccer. At that point, I could really showcase myself because it something that I knew and I could relate to. So we started playing and we could engage more... I was amazed how big the house was; the amount of children was also overwhelming but they made it quite easy to fit into the culture of the house".

"I was able to fit in quite easily because of the culture and language. Everyone was welcoming and everyone took time to interact... we are all connected in some way, our documents, the language and that made easy to interact."

PHASE 2: BELONGING, LOVE AND SELF-ESTEEM – TRAUMA INFORMED PRACTICE: RELATIONAL SAFETY, CONNECTIONS, EMPOWERMENT

The role of culture

The sense of safety in Lawrence House is deeply relational. The children and youth we support have been removed from the social and physical connections that they know and understand. How they feel in relation to their peers, the child and youth care practitioners, social workers and other adults in the house is integral and foundational in relation to rebuilding the sense of belonging and love that has been fractured. In Lawrence House young people are free to cook their own food, to speak their own language; this is a powerful way to creating a sense of belonging and a sense of familiarity, especially when all around is perceived as strange and distant.

"When you observe them while they eat their food, they are happy and there is a warm atmosphere in the dining room. They are connected".

Through young people facing challenges in transitions to independent living we learnt that focusing primarily on physical and safety needs was not providing the sense of identity, belonging, confidence and self efficacy that young people need to thrive in their futures.

We reflected deeply on our practice and what was missing in children's and young people's lives and in our efforts to support them. By listening to their silences as much as their voices we started to hear differently, and understood the detachment from their past, and how this was impacting their sense of future. By valuing who they are, their culture and language, memories started to be reconnected with, and new identities that embraced the past, present and future formed. This enabled a shift from focusing on care and protection, to development and futures that embraced children's and young people's whole selves, in a way that was committed to healing and growth. Being responsive to the cultural, gendered and other intersectional needs of young people is a cornerstone practice.

Trauma informed practice

Through this emphasis on belonging we started to ask ourselves, are the relationships we are establishing interpreted as safe and supportive? Do they promote connection? Do they feel strong enough to enable young people to speak up and ask questions? We started to engage with the idea of trauma informed practice and that these questions could only be answered if practitioners and children and young people see and hear each other without judgement. We explain this to the children by saying, 'I talk to the person that is you and that is right in front of me, whom I fully respect', moving away from their past, or a focus on their behaviours, towards understanding of and commitment to their futures, underpinned by love and compassion. This is how **connections** between people can begin to be formed.

A child and youth care worker has to be **present and attuned to the life space**; this means that others' experience is considered as valuable. Behaviours are seen and understood through the lens of trauma, there is a shift from "what's wrong with you" to "what has happened to you?". Because children and young people on the move have experienced disruption in their primary attachment to both caregivers and places, and on top of this they experienced other traumatic experiences, they often are stuck in their past, in their experience of fear, rejection, and pain. They are stuck in their sensations, feelings, images or meaning that they experienced. Trauma is stuck in their body. Therefore, they are in constant survival mode, disconnected to the self and to others around them. Situations, words, gestures, behaviours can easily be perceived as a threat, hence their physical sensations take them back to their memories and their past, and what we see is a reaction to protect the self to re-experience fear, rejection, and pain.

When young people on the move tell their stories, it is initially often not the "real" story but we can't mistrust them because of that. We give them time to experience safety and trust and work looking at the future; **their truth takes time**. The way we approach and relate to children and youth is the key to

change this negative pattern of reactions. Providing a safe space, where they **feel welcomed and accepted**, in a non-judgmental way, where they feel seen and heard and where they feel they are held in someone else's mind and heart. That is when a sense of reciprocity is felt and healing and growth can happen.

Using creative approaches, like dance, art, poetry, storytelling, can help children and youth to have opportunities to **release their emotions and regulate them**, move their body from where it is stuck, create new positive experiences, return to their sense of self and being. Child and youth care workers need to hold children's space, this means that they **respond, not react**, to behaviours and help children and young people to regulate their emotions. Long term relationships between children and staff, child and youth care workers and management, increase sense of safety and build new connections; connections that were broken.

Ultimately, this work is about enabling self-esteem in children, and building their sense of **self-worth and self-efficacy**. Another important relational space for this work has been peer support. Establishing collaborative spaces between children has been an effort to build hope,

promote an understanding of resilience that is relational, and that recovery and healing is a collective experience. In Lawrence House we do this through a House Committee, which is composed by five young people yearly elected by all residents in the home. The House Committee ensures that the voices of all children and youth are heard and represented. Some of their functions are to represent Lawrence House children and youth and their issues at the four annual board meetings; assist all children and youth by applying and enforcing the Lawrence House Children's complaint procedure; ensure that children and youth of Lawrence House are allowed to participate in matters concerning the home and them individually; be a 'sounding board' for management when needing assistance in exploring the interest and viability of new ideas and projects for Lawrence House. This is our way to give voice to the children and youth, involve them in decision making, empower young people and thereby increase a sense of community.

Being trauma sensitive and intentionally present, building connections, welcoming and valuing emotions and holding them through co-regulation, all this foster healing and create attachment.

PHASE 3: SELF ACTUALISATION - MASTERY AND AGENCY

Reaching full potential

Currently we are working towards the self-actualisation of the children and youth in our care. We support children and young people in the present moment, facilitating the access to resources, realisation of their sense of power and strength as to enable the full development of their potential. Our work is to create opportunities for children and youth to explore their talents, make decisions and take risks, then learn from their successes and mistakes: children and youth become active agents of their lives.

Our work goes beyond young people's time at Lawrence House, it includes their transition to independence and their wellbeing and empowerment over the longer term. This is of course different for each young person, and intersects with many other factors in their lives such as their stage of development, relationship with family, experiences of trauma, and legal status in South Africa.

Impact of documentation for children and young people on the move

For children and young people on the move in alternative care settings their lives are deeply interwoven with their

documentation status, or lack thereof. The insecurity and uncertainty this brings to young people is incredibly destructive, impacting self-esteem and motivation to build a future. We have learnt that engaging on this issue with children as early as possible supports transparency and trust within the emerging relationship but also shapes opportunities to access legal advice, and efforts to intervene. As a Scalabrini project, Lawrence House benefits from the organisation's advocacy work and deep commitment to upholding the best interest of children on the move. This is an ongoing process of learning, action and reflection, engaging with the changing legal and political context.

"Documents is the hardest part because a lot of people can offer us opportunities but the document was a problem. And you were limited... My documents weren't ready but I had to leave Lawrence House, what am I going to do?"

It is difficult when you do leave and your documents are not sorted and the Home Affairs process is stressful. That is the main block of everything like, you can't get a certain job, or a bank account."

KEY LEARNINGS

Ultimately, what we have established over time has been a continuously evolving approach to supporting children and young people on the move. The key areas of growth that we have transitioned through relate to a shift

- From relying solely on a care and protection approach to focusing on young people's dignity, development, futures and their growth
- From focusing on the behaviour of a young person, to the emotions and experiences driving that behaviour, and ensuring safety in interpersonal relationship so that trust is built to support self-expression
- From adult initiated processes to centring young people's agency and decision-making power, underpinned by trustworthiness and transparency within the CYCC.

All of this has required a commitment to unlearning and letting go of power, trusting in processes and establishing the practices that enable us to meet young people where they are, and build connections with young people's whole selves. As a CYCC we have had to work on this collectively, to take a trauma informed approach in our own relationships with each other, so as to feel safe enough as a team to be able to do this work.

Trauma informed practice teaches us to constantly work on different levels:

- At personal level: being aware of oneself, own triggers, own reactions, own patterns, acknowledge one's emotions and being able to self-regulate, practice self-care, self-compassion and mindfulness;
- At team level: showing vulnerability, being open to constructive criticism, give each other compliments, supporting each other, sharing feelings, accountability, open communication;
- Regarding relationships with children and youth: being present in the life space, fostering emotional safety (so that we don't retraumatize but we are able to be sensitive to the child we are engaging), communicating sensitively (controlling the tone of voice, the posture, the language we use), acknowledging the child or young person (for example when they come back from school "feel" where they are in the moment), the importance of apologising when we, as adult caregivers, do something wrong and only then return to the "normal" relationship so that relational safety is re-established, authentically engage with the young person ("speak from heart to heart" speak not to the brain but to the emotions to create connections and co-regulation), empathy and non-judgement.

Being open to learning, to trying something new and building a different understanding in support of our work to support and strengthen young people's lives has been foundational.

In P. Levine's book *In an unspoken voice* (2010) he states that "the therapist must help to create an environment of relative safety, an atmosphere that conveys refuge, hope and possibility". We believe that Lawrence House is a therapeutic milieu that strives to be a place where children and young people on the move experience safety, where they feel a sense of familiarity and sense of home, where they are valued and acknowledged and where they can dream and create their future as resilient young people.

Please get in touch if you are interested in these themes, and the work we are doing at Lawrence House to create new programmatic responses to the growing complexity of circumstances faced by children and young people on the move in alternative care. We are committed to growing our relationships, and community of practice around this work.

If you are interested to explore more Trauma informed practice, here are some resources:

Siegel, D. J., & Solomon, M. (Eds.). (2003). *Healing Trauma: Attachment, Mind, Body and Brain* (Norton Series on Interpersonal Neurobiology). WW Norton & Company

Porges, S. W. (2011). *The polyvagal theory: neurophysiological foundations of emotions, attachment, communication, and self-regulation* (Norton Series on Interpersonal Neurobiology). WW Norton & Company

Levine, P. A., & Frederick, A. (1997). *Waking the tiger: Healing trauma: The innate capacity to transform overwhelming experiences*. North Atlantic Books

www.traumainformedcare.chcs.org

www.samhsa.gov

www.nctsn.org

www.nicabm.com

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