



SIHMA

Scalabrini Institute for
Human Mobility in Africa

PATHWAYS OF WELLBEING AND (UN)BELONGING

UNDERSTANDING THE EXPERIENCE OF
MIGRANT YOUTH IN ALTERNATIVE CARE
AND RECENTLY OUT OF CARE IN CAPE TOWN

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**TO THE YOUNG PEOPLE
WHO TOLD THEIR STORIES
WITH HUMOUR, FRUSTRATION, SADNESS,
STRENGTH AND GRACE.**

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EXECUTIVE SUMMARY

Previous research identified the need to further understand the lives of migrant youth (including refugees and asylum seekers) who have left or were close to leaving alternative care institutions. Civil society, too, has identified this group as almost invisible in South African Government immigration and child protection policies, making the process of legalising their stay in South Africa very complex. This study set out to understand the experiences of young migrants leaving alternative care as they try to access documentation, how they live and strategise around legal insecurity and what impact this has on their sense of identity and emotional wellbeing.

Two groups of young people each participated in a two-day workshop. One group had left alternative care and were aged from 18-25, the other was about to leave alternative care and were aged from 16-18. The sample was purposive and focused on young people identified by three Child and Youth Care Centres in Cape Town as youth who were struggling to access documentation. Using a participatory art-based approach the research privileged the young people's own experience, giving them choice to represent their world in the way they chose. Working with an artist and a wealth of art material they made art-books around the theme of 'My belonging story'. The young people could then choose to share what they had made in a group discussion. This discussion was audio recorded, transcribed and then used as data for analysis. A thematic approach was used to analyse the data.

The themes that emerged allow an understanding of how both past experiences and present experiences impact on young people's sense of identity and belonging and their emotional wellbeing. The experiences of abandonment and abuse that led to them being placed in alternative care had a huge impact on their sense of themselves and their ability to cope with growing into adulthood. Although they had found ways to cope with this vulnerability through finding good friends, playing sport, spending time with siblings, listening to music, reading and journaling the past had deeply affected their sense of 'belonging'.

Alongside their past experiences they also had to cope with being an outsider at school and in the community. They described how everyone they met asked 'where are you from?' confirming that they did not belong in South Africa. They were also frequently bullied at school both verbally and physically. This experience of being labelled an outsider left them "always searching, searching for where I belong". Once they had been placed in alternative care they acknowledged that though they were safe and supported they, understandably, still wished they were part of a family.

In relation to documentation all their narratives included stories of how they had left care at 18 without full legal documentation. For some, the care staff had taken action to access documents, but the process was so complex and so slow that they had turned 18 before any documents giving them legal status had come through. Others described how alternative care staff had neglected to help them access documentation before they turned 18, often only turning to the issue once the young people were due to leave care.

They described the practical impacts of not being documented. Their wishes to get a bursary, a driver's license, a "good job", for example, were all denied. The older group who had experience of attempting to overcome these difficulties expressed frustration, anger and even desperation at their inability to live a life like a normal "human being". This was exacerbated by their experience of constant delay and the overt discrimination they encountered when trying to access documents at the Department of Home Affairs. The emotional impact of non-documentation emerged as a dominant theme. They felt "invisible", like a "ghost", in a "dark

hole”, like an object – “a book that is just moved around”.

In describing their lived experience the young people who participated in this study provide us with a rich and textured narrative of young migrants leaving care. Alongside their ability to find ways to cope with their difficult reality they help us understand how vulnerable they are both practically and emotionally because they are invisible in law and policy, they have essentially been “lost in care”. Finally, the study highlights how important it is to add our voice to present civil society advocacy to address the legal status of migrant children taken into government care.

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ACRONYMS

CYCC: Child and Youth Care Centre
DRC: Democratic Republic of Congo
DSD: Department of Social Development
SIHMA: Scalabrini Institute for Human Mobility in Africa
UN: United Nations
UNHCR: United Nations High Commissioner for Refugees

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GLOSSARY OF TERMS USED IN THIS REPORT

Alternative care

UN Guidelines for the Alternative Care of Children (GA A/RES/64/142), alternative care is “where the child’s own family is unable, even with appropriate support, to provide adequate care for the child, or abandons or relinquishes the child, the State is responsible for protecting the rights of the child and ensuring appropriate alternative care, with or through competent local authorities and duly authorized civil society organizations. It is the role of the State, through its competent authorities, to ensure the supervision of the safety, well-being and development of any child placed in alternative care and the regular review of the appropriateness of the care arrangement provided”

Asylum-seeker

An individual who has sought international protection from persecution or serious harm and whose claim for refugee status has not yet been determined (UNHCR, n.d.c).¹

Child and Youth Care Centre

A Child and Youth Care Centre, as defined by the National Child Care and Protection Policy (2019), is a facility for the provision of court-ordered residential care to children outside the child’s family environment in accordance with a residential care programme suited for the children in the facility.

Migrant Youth

In this research study “migrant youth” refers to young people who have human mobility backgrounds (including refugees, asylum seekers and migrants) as they either migrated across international borders to South Africa from their country of origin or they are the children of migrants.

Refugee

According to Article 1A (2) of the 1951 Convention Relating to the Status of Refugees (as modified by the 1967 Protocol) a refugee is a person, who “owing to well-founded fear of persecution for reasons of race, religion, nationality, membership of a particular social group or political opinions is outside of the country of his nationality and is unable or owing to such fear, is unwilling to avail himself of the protection of that country” (UNHCR, n.d.b).

Statelessness

A person who is not considered as a national by any state. As defined in the 1954 Convention relating to the Status of Stateless Persons, a stateless child is a person under the age of 18 who is not considered a national by any state under its legislation. Children lacking a birth certificate or other identity document may be at risk of statelessness (UNHCR, n.d.c).

¹ UNHCR – UN Refugee Agency. n.d.c. ‘UNHCR Master Glossary of Terms.’ Accessed on 4 August 2022. <https://www.unhcr.org/glossary/>

GIRLS AND BOYS DESCRIBED HOW SPORT, ESPECIALLY BEING IN A TEAM HAD ALSO BROUGHT ABOUT A CHANGE IN BEHAVIOUR. THEY DESCRIBED HOW IT WAS THEIR ABILITY IN THE SPORT THAT GAVE THEM CONFIDENCE AND A SENSE OF SELF-WORTH. IF THEY WERE GOOD PLAYERS THIS GAVE THEM STATUS AT SCHOOL, THEY BECAME AN INSIDER. (PAGE 26)



ball

Talent



1. INTRODUCTION AND MOTIVATION

Children and young people with experiences of migration in South Africa are building their lives in contexts of deep insecurity (Magqibelo et al., 2016; Willie & Mfubu, 2016; Opfermann, 2019). This insecurity arises both from the precarity of livelihood and their legal status in South Africa which is linked in turn to accessing the documentation that confers legality. Over the past few years, the Scalabrini Centre of Cape Town, Scalabrini Institute for Human Mobility in Africa (SIHMA) and other organisations like the Adonis Musati Project have conducted conversations and other interventions to investigate experiences of migrant youth² in Cape Town.

As part of this work Shahrokh and Treves (2020) conducted research exploring ‘belonging’ with a group of young migrants in Cape Town. Many came from government registered alternative care institutions, called Child and Youth Care Centres (CYCCs)³. On completion of this work the motivation to continue research came from two sources, firstly the young participants asked that more space be given to young people in their situation to share their experiences. Second, the Shahrokh and Treves study expressed the need for further research with migrant youth who had left or were close to leaving alternative care institutions, a group that they saw as almost invisible in the literature and in South African Government immigration and child protection policies.

This research study is a response to these requests. It seeks to understand:

- How do migrant youth who have recently left alternative care or are about to leave care in the near future understand and experience ‘belonging’?
- How do the past experiences that led to them being placed in alternative care affect their ability to navigate belonging in South Africa?
- What is their experience of accessing documentation and what impact does the process have on their sense of identity and emotional wellbeing?
- What impact does legal insecurity have at an everyday level in relation to school, work, social relationships and their functioning as contributing citizens?
- What facilitates their sense of belonging and what hinders it?
- What strategies do they apply to negotiate living in a place where they are constantly reminded that they do not belong?

1.2 WHAT DO WE MEAN BY ‘BELONGING’

‘Belonging’ is a multi-faceted concept, explored by psychologists, anthropologists and political scientists among others. We sought an understanding of how young people make meaning of belonging as individuals *and* how surrounding intersecting systems⁴ such as the social and political impact on this meaning-making. We drew, therefore, on definitions from a wide range of scholarship to inform the research questions, the research approach and the analysis in this study.

² In this research study “migrant youth” refers to young people who have human mobility backgrounds (including refugees, asylum seekers and migrants) as they either migrated across international borders to South Africa from their country of origin or they are the children of migrants.

³ A Child and Youth Care Centre, as defined by the National Child Care and Protection Policy (2019), is a facility for the provision of court-ordered residential care to children outside the child’s family environment in accordance with a residential care programme suited for the children in the facility.

⁴ This refers to the intersecting systems such as family, community, laws, economics that impact on the development of children and young people. See (Bronfenbrenner, 2006).

Allen (2021) provides one of the understandings of belonging from within psychology. 'Belonging' is a "subjective feeling of deep connection with social groups, physical places, and individual and collective experiences" (Allen, et al. 2021, p.87). This need for connection predicts numerous mental, physical, social, economic and behavioural outcomes. Feeling that one has "a place in the world" (Arendt 1971, p.296) is central too, to identity formation, a central aspect of young people's healthy socio-psychological development. Shahrokh and Treves (2020), building on Antonsich (2010) define 'belonging' as "our connection to people, culture, place and subjective sense of home ... mediated by a politics of inclusion and exclusion" (p. 90). Connection is again central, but in this definition the outer systems of community and society are included in an understanding of belonging. Additionally, this study draws on an understanding of belonging articulated by Jackson (1995) who suggests that what helps people feel "at home in the world", no matter where they are, is the ability to control the everyday objects and the activities the objects represent in their world.

... people work – in reality and through illusion, alone and in concert with others – to shape the course of their own lives [so] ... home is grounded less in a place and more in the activity that occurs in the place. We often feel at home in the world when what we do has some effect and what we say carries some weight (p. 123 and 148).

What Jackson is suggesting is that belonging is linked to a sense of power over our world and a sense of powerlessness. Building on this rich understanding we sought to explore how young people experience belonging internally, how they articulate and experience 'a sense of home', inclusion and exclusion, power and powerlessness. Finally, how the meaning they make of belonging impacts on their identity formation and their ability to become contributing citizens in South Africa.

1.3 LEGAL AND POLICY BACKGROUND

To understand some of the findings that emerged from this study it is necessary to understand South African government policy around migrants. The migrant community in South Africa is diverse with a long history of movement from neighbouring countries into South Africa for work. This economic, and, largely informal, migration continues, with large numbers of migrants undocumented (McDonald, et al.,1999).

Over the last decades many families and children from the Great Lakes Region have also made their way to South Africa to escape conflict (Misago, 2015). Many of these forced migrants are eligible for asylum and refugee status. Some of the children in this study were in this category. The Department of Home Affairs has jurisdiction over documentation of refugees. On entering the country a family or individual would apply for asylum seeker status which gives them the right to work and study while their refugee status is determined. While waiting for their applications for refugee status to be processed, asylum seekers have to renew their permits once a year. The process of refugee determination can take many years because the institutional process is deeply corrupt and inefficient (Amit, 2015). Once refugee status has been attained accessing permanent residence status can also take many years. This places refugees in a situation of status limbo for many years.

The situation is even more complex for children in alternative care. They enter the Child Protection system, managed by the Department of Social Development, through the Children's Court and are then placed in a Child and Youth Care Centre (CYCC) or in alternative placement such as foster care. Their lives are, therefore, governed by the Department of Social Development, the Department of Justice and the Department of Home Affairs. There is a lack of cooperation between these departments and they are working with contradictory legislation in relation to child migrants (Department of Social Development et al., 2023).

The main applicant for asylum or refugee status is most often a parent or other caregiver that the child arrives with. The adult would list their dependents on their status application. This means the child is dependent on the adult within the asylum and refugee application process. What is pertinent in this study is that as Sloth-Nielsen and Ackermann point out "it is obvious

that where a child is separated from the adult applicant – including by virtue of being taken into the care system – difficulties will arise in finalising the application process” (p. 16).

Sloth-Nielsen and Ackermann also point out other complexities.

Nationally, the Department of Social Development Guidelines require the immediate registration and documentation of the child [when they arrive at a CYCC], but are silent on the details. The Guidelines provide no indication of the type of registration that must take place, or the documentation which must be obtained. In fact the Guidelines have no practical effect since no registration mechanism or documentation category is in place. Moreover, the Department is not the custodian of identification documentation, which must be issued by the Department of Home Affairs (p. 15).

This complexity means that young people often leave care with no documents or documentation still in process. With the above background, this research seeks to understand the effect of non-documentation on these young people’s sense of belonging and their wellbeing.

1.4 WELL-BEING AND NON-DOCUMENTATION

Global studies have shown that the impact of the institutionally-produced waiting described above on young people’s sense of self and sense of future is detrimental to their mental wellbeing (Chase and Allsopp, 2021; Gonzales, Suárez-Orozco & Dedios-Sanguinetti, 2013). This can be argued as a form of administrative violence, which acts to de-legitimise children and young people’s claims to legal documentation and immigration status (Mayblin, Wake & Kazemi, 2020) and could lead to statelessness (Sloth-Nielsen & Ackermann, 2016). Within the time of non-documentation, young people live with fear of destitution, exploitation, detention and/or deportation as they transition to adulthood. It also impacts on their sense of identity in society, leading to feelings of lacking acceptance and not belonging, or having a place to call ‘home’ (Smit 2015). The Treves & Shahrokh (2020) study showed that many carry the impact of this experience into their future lives, which deeply impacts their sense of self-worth, and the resources they have to draw on to build their lives, even when legal immigration or documentation status is secured. Given this background the present study seeks to understand this dynamic in more detail through participatory research with young people themselves.

1.5 RESEARCH QUESTION

How are young people with direct migration experiences navigating structural (political, legal, social, and economic) constraints and how is their sense of wellbeing and belonging impacted?

Sub question: In what ways are migrant young people’s lives and sense of belonging shaped, limited and facilitated by processes of documentation, related care and protection of the state?

1.6 RESEARCH OBJECTIVES AND AIMS

The overarching aim is to explore the interaction between individual, social and structural factors in the construction of wellbeing and belonging for young people with migration experiences in the South African context. This research is oriented towards advocacy, so that Scalabrini Centre of Cape Town and Scalabrini Institute for Human Mobility in Africa (SIHMA) working alongside a network of civil society organisations can work with legal and social work professionals to drive change.

In particular we hope it will contribute to advocacy work by civil society organisations on the need for children being documented while in care and where necessary amend legislation to facilitate such documentation processes.

ZAIRE ZAMBIA



2. METHODOLOGY

2.1 RESEARCH PARTICIPANTS

We worked with two groups of young people:

- 18-25 year olds who had left care
- 16-18 year old who were still in care

The participants were purposively⁵ selected i.e. young people who had recently left care or who were about to leave care within the age group we had identified. Scalabrini Centre of Cape Town has a Children's Rights Project with a specific focus on documentation of children on the move mainly unaccompanied and separated foreign children. They identified young people from two registered CYCCs and one resource centre for migrant youth to participate in this research.

The two age groups worked in separate workshops each of which took place over two-days.

2.2 RESEARCH APPROACH

The research used a participatory arts-based approach informed by the work of researchers such as Akkesson (2014), Bradbury (2017), Clacherty (2021) Lenette (2019) Shahrokh (2022). Lenette (2019) describes one of the reasons for using this approach as follows:

Creating space for arts-based methodologies, for people to tell their stories of exile, displacement and belonging in collaborative, co-productive and genuinely participatory ways, is an ethical and political act (p. vii).

With reference to Lenette's point that the approach is a political act, all of the research carried out by SIHMA drives change because it "conducts research that contributes to informed policy-making and promotes the rights and dignity of migrants and refugees in Africa" (SIHMA Annual Report, 2022, p.4.) The extent to which the findings of this study will be used to advocate at high levels of government makes this work an act of advocacy.

In relation to the approach being ethical, firstly it allows the participants' knowledge and lived experience to be paramount (Aldridge, 2014). Through working on their own with art materials to create images, objects or movement, the research participants are able to choose what they want to communicate. Allowing total choice of how, where and with whom the artwork is made creates a sense of safety. The activity of making the art also allows for reflection in a process that the artist-facilitator Diane Welvering, who worked with young migrants in an arts-based research study (Clacherty, 2016) between 1999 and 2005, describes below.

I wanted to create an environment in which the child participants could determine their own creative outcome, using their own initiative to the maximum, a kind of creative free space, to encourage a spontaneous, extremely individual response from each child. I decided to offer the children such a wide range of art-making options that they could 'lose themselves' in the process. At an important point – where I felt creativity worked at its optimum – the children would no longer feel self-conscious, and would dialogue in close relation to the materials at hand, absorbed in the free-flowing dynamic of their own ideas.

The research data is not contained in the artwork itself but rather the discussion around the work. After working on their art 'object' we usually sit in a circle with the artwork placed anonymously on the floor or a table in the centre of the circle. The participants begin by

⁵ "The purposive sampling technique ... is the deliberate choice of a participant due to the qualities the participant possesses. It is a nonrandom technique ... Simply put, the researcher decides what needs to be known and sets out to find people who can and are willing to provide the information by virtue of knowledge or experience." (Etikan et al. 2016 p. 2)

describing their work and then tell the narratives contained behind or inside it. At this point the research participants can again choose what they say about their work, or even if they do not want to talk about it at all. In this research study two of the participants chose not to talk at all which was received as completely acceptable and even celebrated as an expression of their right to choose.

The making of and talking about the art rather than their own direct experience allows for emotional distance from what could be traumatic or distressing experiences (Lester, 2013; Clacherty, 2019). This is particularly important in the context of migrancy and the fact that all of the young people we worked with had been placed in care because of extremely negative experiences. The researcher creates an informal environment during the discussions, reducing their power as much as possible and elevating the young peoples' experience and knowledge about their own lives.

This process evokes memories of places, people and emotions among other things. For the researcher, because art-making is largely intuitive, it allows young people to capture and talk about the layers of their lived experience, making 'thicker' (Geertz, 1968) data than would normally emerge from a focus group, for example (Clacherty, 2021; Wilson & Milne, 2016). Of course, the remembering process and discussion is carefully monitored and managed by the researcher to make sure that the internal defences that vulnerable young people create to help them survive adverse experiences (Perrotta, 2020) are not broken down. These defences protect them psychologically. The researcher works in an intentional way to protect psychological defences. This is where choice to speak is important as young people have an innate sense of how much they can 'tell' (Kistner, pers. com). Asking probing questions, for example, that seek details about emotions and traumatic experiences can break down defences that a researcher does not have the professional skill to contain or use for positive purposes. In this work, therefore, probing questions were used for clarity but not to ask participants to go beyond what they felt comfortable saying.

Another reason related to ethics is that this approach has benefits for young people. One important benefit is that there is power in creating something and then speaking about it, which in the context of powerlessness, that so many migrant children feel, is a positive experience in itself.

Alongside the ethics embedded in the process the widely accepted ethical principles of informed consent⁶, confidentiality, beneficence and ensuring non-maleficence were all applied. The research protocol was given ethical clearance by the University of Cape Town's Faculty of Health Sciences Human Research Ethics Committee.⁷

2.3 RESEARCH PROCESS

The art-based research process was co-facilitated by the author and a young, local multi-media artist whose work is edgy and activist. She had experience in working with young people and training in the approach and the ethical processes that needed to be applied. With the artist's creative and technical input the young people made 'zines', an art genre where a mixture of art, photography, found images, objects and text is put together into a magazine-like format, usually within a small folded 'book'. Unlike magazines, zines are eccentric, often cover unconventional subject matter or have an activist purpose. They are handmade and photocopied for distribution (Knobel & Lankshear, 2002) amongst a particular population.

After some active games to introduce the group to each other and to create a relaxed environment, the artist began the process by describing the art form, showing a large number of zines from her collection. These fascinated the young people who commented on the irreverent themes, the comic, doodle-like drawings, the different forms of text and the actual shapes and sizes of the zines. She then showed the group myriad colourful art materials she had collected

⁶ Written consent was given by Guardians of under 18 plus written assent from these young people. Those over 18 gave their written consent.

⁷ HREC REF 640/2021

and briefly described how the material could be used for painting, drawing, collage and other visual art forms.

The instruction given to the young people was intentionally open-ended to allow the way they made meaning of the concept of belonging to emerge. This approach, besides preventing 'leading' the narratives, creates rich and often unexpected information. In this case the instruction was: You are going to make a zine called "My belonging story" or "My story of belonging".

As the group arrived greeting each other with the gestures and words of the local city and dressed in their carefully curated street style all of us in the research team had a moment of doubt about how easily they would accept the idea of crayons, paint and scissors. There was no need to worry about participation though, the performative identity (so often a necessity for migrant young people to look as if they 'belong' in the South African communities in which they live) was forgotten. The group quickly began choosing and folding the different kinds of paper, discussing with each other what they were going to do, referring back to the collection of zines, collecting art materials and setting up tables to work on. There was soon a quiet focussed intensity, that characterises this phase in an art-based research process, as they worked on their zines. This enthusiasm was partly because the art form had been chosen intentionally to appeal to the age group, because the young artist had inspired them with her enthusiasm and because of the richness of the materials.

Once the young people felt they had 'finished' their zines we all gathered in a circle with the artwork placed in the middle of the circle. This created a measure of anonymity; they could talk about their zine without identifying it if they chose. Some of the young people chose not to talk at all. Using a set of questions derived from the research aim (see Appendix 1) the researcher then facilitated a discussion about the artwork. The discussion was a "genuine dialogic relationship[s] with other ideas, with the ideas of others" (Bakhtin, 1981 p. 88). As we spoke some of the young people asked questions, related aspects of their own stories in response and presented other points of view, often referring to the images in their zines. The researcher was careful to keep an air of playfulness to make everyone feel safe but if anyone expressed emotion this was acknowledged and universalised "I can see Maria feels angry about this. I think we all feel that kind of anger sometimes". Checking on their emotional state after the discussion was also important. Provision was made to refer young people to a professional after the research if we thought it was needed.

2.4 ANALYSIS OF THE DATA

The discussion was recorded, transcribed and then analysed. Recording was used in order that the analysis worked directly from what the young people said. The data was analysed using a thematic analysis (Patton, 1990; Braun & Clark, 2006) approach where transcripts were read, re-read then marked up with emergent codes. Themes were created by grouping the coded items, looking for patterns and outliers in the data as this was done. The themes were checked against the transcripts again. Once the data had been organised into a set of draft themes the analysis went beyond a simple content analysis into what Squire (2008) calls an "experience-centred approach" (p. 50) where one assumes that the narratives are the "means of human sense-making" (Squire p. 43). With this in mind we looked in particular at how the young people experienced 'belonging' and how they attempted to make sense of their identities in the context of 'belonging' in their past and present circumstances (Kohli & Mather, 2003). This process was then organised again into another set of themes which were then written up (going back to the transcripts throughout to check interpretations).

One of the processes involved in analysing qualitative research data is looking for patterns. Braun & Clark (2012) describe this in the quote below.

[Thematic analysis] is a way of identifying what is common to the way a topic is talked or written about ... Numerous patterns could be identified across any data set ... the purpose of analysis is to identify those relevant to answering a particular research question (p. 57).

Looking for patterns will identify the most important and relevant themes related to the research question. During this process some themes emerge as more dominant than others, for example, they are mentioned more often. The tone (or the emotion) of the discussion is another important pattern to be aware of (Braun & Clark, 2012), most often this is identified by looking at the underlying emotion behind the words. The content that emerged from the 16-18 year old group, which is described below was very different from the older group, for example, specific, personal narratives were rare. The tone too was different, discussion was guarded, muted and tinged with sadness.

Before exploring what the young people said it is important to point out that the data presented here is based on the zines they had made and that this task was done alone. This would suggest that the pattern of discussion was not set in place by echoing what others had said in the discussion.

The emergent themes are presented in the Findings section below.

3. FINDINGS

Initially we had planned to present the findings of both groups of young people but we found that the tone and content they described was so different that we have separated the findings. The two sets of data do talk to each other, though, as understanding the younger group still in care gives insight into the patterns that emerged in the older group and vice versa.

3.1 FINDINGS FROM 18-25 YEAR OLDS

This section is an analysis of what emerged from the older group of young people who had left care when they were 18. The emergent themes were:

Theme 1: Origin stories

Theme 2: Journeys

Theme 3: (Un)belonging in early lives in South Africa

Theme 4: Abandonment

Theme 5: Early experience of documentation issues

Theme 6: Not being documented

Theme 7 Coping strategies

Quotes from the young people themselves make up the core of the findings to highlight the fact that the 'knowledge' (Lenette, 2019) came from the young people themselves.

Theme 1: Origin-stories

Almost all of the first pages of the Zines and the narratives the young people told, began with a statement of their birthplaces, even if they had lived there for less than a year. Apart from some of them including a map cut out of an old atlas which was amongst the art materials they gave no detail in their zines or other identifiers such as flags (see Clacherty, 2016). They did not talk about their country of origin in the discussions apart from saying a simple phrase "I was born in the DRC". The only other time they mentioned their country of origin was when they described being asked by South Africans 'where are you from?' (see Theme 3). This suggests that their identity is not strongly linked to their country of origin. Only one young woman talked about how food and language linked her to her culture of origin. She was one of the very few who had a stable early childhood in a home where she belonged with memories of that home.

When I say culture, I mean things like eating pap, pondu stuff like that, that I can share

that with other people who don't know about it, so when I talk about culture I talk about the food, the language, things like that that I can share with others, like I have that in me that I grew up with.

Apart from this young woman one other participant described childhood memories from his country of origin. He describes in the quote below how trees growing around his home in DRC were meaningful for him. His zine consisted of a large painting of a tree.

Like when I was a child in Congo, with my mother, we lived in this house where there was a massive mango tree and an avocado tree. And when it was in season, these mango trees would be like a golden, orange colour. And then I used to go pick it with a long stick. And then me and my mom and my brother would be eating it. And there were times when my mom bought ducks and the tree would be there, when my grandfather came and visited me, the tree was there, when I had to go play outside and I had my first parties. So, I was always surrounded by [nature] in special moments. I felt [this] was the most belonging spot, I felt for myself [I belonged when] I was amongst plants and trees. Because it gave me a sense of calmness and understanding. And it really fulfilled my soul.

Figure 1: A young's person memory of plants and trees



He then went on to describe how this memory had become a resource for him in his present life. Memories of this tree and the other “plants and trees” helped him to see that nature was a place where he could find recovery when his life became difficult after he came to South Africa. He describes how he now goes walking and biking into the natural area on the mountains surrounding Cape Town when he feels sad or overwhelmed.

As I cycle through the mountain, there are always trees. And it gives me the most amount of belonging. Because amongst the problems that... people are not constant. Sometimes you might feel belonged and sometimes you might get hurt by those people. And there were so many examples that I could find within nature that ... made me a better person, that gave me a proper foundation to move on. And the way that I

was able to recover from hurt or pain or danger was going to the forest, going to the mountain. This picture shows the tree [where I] found my refuge under its branch.

Unlike this young man most of the young people in this study had no memories of home and very few of 'belonging' as children. What did emerge though were memories of dislocation and loss of connection which made them question their identity. The quotes below illustrate this.

Even at a young age while I was with my grandmother [who I called] mom I was told ... 'this is your mom' but I found out later she was not my mom but my grandmother. So, I did not have that, I did not feel like I belonged there ... I was just like I do not know where do I actually belong, you know.

So, my life has been about asking questions. At the time I was born I was born in a refugee camp in Congo, but my parents are Burundian ... I just found out recently actually, I thought I was born in Burundi, but I was born in Congo in a refugee camp because there was always political crisis in my country. I never knew who was my mom or my dad because my dad passed away before I was born, and my mom passed away after giving birth to me. Yes, so my whole life has been questions. What happened? What is going on?

Theme 2: Journeys

All but one of the young people in this group came to South Africa when they were young and most didn't remember how they came to South Africa. Some did, however, describe fragments of their journey, which carry a sense of fear and confusion.

I remember my mother used to put me in this bag ... And there were policemen who used to ride horses and there were fences. We used to go one by one through the fences. I cannot remember much because I was still young.

One young woman described her mother telling a 'half-truth' perhaps built on the fact that she herself was not sure of where the family was going.

Next thing I just hear my mom, 'pack your bags you are going to America.' I am like, 'America!' I don't even know what is America, that's the funny part, and my mom was explaining 'no it [will be] fun there, you are going to be rich, you are going to be living life.'

Most related, with some distress, that the adults around them did not explain where and why they were moving or what had caused them to move. Others described how once they were older and trying to work out their identity-stories they had asked their caregivers about why they had moved. This question was always met with obfuscation and a short response.

I am still trying to find who I am, I am not yet knowing who is N (her name)? What does N want? Because of my past it is everywhere, it is scattered. I did not get the whole, full story yet ... because if I go to my dad, he will say this, my mom will say this. If ... I could remember what was happening then I would be 'okay this is what is your next step', but you cannot move forward because you are still stuck as that little girl. Where is she right now?

- I was never told ... but your parents experienced it ... your parents never told you.
- But I think it is very traumatic [for them] and [they are] also trying to avoid re-traumatising [their] child.

As the above quote illustrates the young people recognised that this was often because the story was too painful for caregivers to tell but it is clear that this 'not telling' affected the young people's sense of identity. Others described how as children they did not know they had escaped violence or that they were seeking refuge in South Africa so when young even the identity of 'refugee' was denied them. Often this had an impact on their attempt to access documentation as this young man explains.

When you are younger and they want you to apply for a document, your parents do a lot of that work, the interview, the fingerprints – it is done by your parents. But if they do not get [your] document by the time you are eighteen, when you go to Home Affairs, they want the young person himself to go and do that interview to answer those questions. So, when you speak about the war, the conflict that happened back then [it] did not affect [you]. Now they are asking me a question [to assess if I am a refugee] they want me to talk about an experience that I cannot recall.

What also emerged was that some of them did not want to know anything about their childhood dislocation because it was emotionally upsetting, like many of their other childhood memories.

For me I feel like the past destroyed me a lot, what I am. I am broken down a lot to the point where I [think it is better] if you have forgotten about it, I do not know the journey very well, the way I came here. I can remember only a little bit, so I do not know what happened when I was young when I came to South Africa. So, I think it is better if I do not even want to know.

Theme 3: (Un)belonging in early lives in South Africa

Using a chronological narrative form, most followed their origin and journey narratives with descriptions of their early experiences in South Africa. Again the sense of dislocation dominates as the quote below illustrates. The young woman speaking below describes an experience that took place soon after she arrived in Cape Town as a young child.

And then my dad was like, ‘go play’. We go play and the kids are like speaking ‘xo, xo, xo’, they are like ‘xo, xo, xo’ [a reference to the clicks characteristic of the locally dominant Xhosa language]. Then luckily, we met our cousin and then our cousin was like, ‘this is how South Africa is’ but we were speaking Swahili to them.

Many also described the problems related to not speaking English or understanding Afrikaans (a local language subject compulsory in South African primary schools) especially when they arrived at school. This experience told them, again, that they did not belong.

- You know you are writing but you don’t understand what you are reading.
- Afrikaans?
- It was English, my brother.
- Some of us passed it [Afrikaans] without understanding it.

Their strength and ability to overcome this issue was also evident in their narratives, they all soon learned English even though some did so in unconventional ways’ “We learned English from watching ‘Power Puff Girls’ (a popular cartoon on television)”.

Language was a dominant theme in the young people’s narratives, for them it was closely intertwined with belonging. Some of them spoke many languages learned from the adults they had lived or travelled with. This multiplicity of language was often a reflection of the mobility of their childhood.

Swahili was what I spoke with my mom most of the time and Lingala is what I learned once my mom went away. When I was around nine or ten my mom went away for a month and so I stayed with friends who ... only spoke Lingala [so I learned Lingala].

One young woman told a story which illustrates how language was seen as a signifier of belonging or not belonging even among groups of migrant children. Born to a Congolese mother, when she arrived in Cape Town she was bullied by other Congolese children at school because she did not speak fluent Lingala, the most common language spoken by refugees from DRC in South Africa. She spoke Swahili learned from the family member she lived with as a young child.

The Congolese or Lingala-speaking kids they always were like ‘you are Congolese, why are you speaking Swahili? You are such a liar, where are you from?’. And they were

always asking me, 'who are you? Where do you belong? Why are you lying, stop lying to us. You are Congolese?' But because I spoke Swahili and I didn't fit in with the Congolese-speaking kids, because I didn't really look like them and when I spoke the little Lingala I knew, they were like 'no, don't talk sister, just stay quiet' [because my Lingala was bad]. So, it was either I was being told that I am Congolese, I was being told not to speak Lingala or that I am not Congolese. But I always identified with Swahili.

As the quote above illustrates the young woman found the bullying from Congolese girls deeply alienating because now even this identity was being questioned. The quote also illustrates how language is used as an identifier by other migrants, the girl's questions also suggest a sense of an 'in group' and an 'out group'. This appeared to be a common phenomenon; child migrants 'sticking together' as a coping strategy. The boys did describe having South African friends, however. These friends were most often made during sport activities.

Another very common theme raised by all of the young people was that when peers or adults heard them speaking another language they were asked many questions about their identity. Language was definitely an indicator of being an outsider to South African peers. They described fellow students constantly asking them where they came from. "What are you speaking? Swahili? What is Swahili? Where do you come from? What are you?"

They also described questioning about their identity in other places. People in the street, at church, everywhere, always asked 'where are you from,' often as an opener to conversation or just as a lone question in the minibus taxi or in the street. As soon as this issue was raised in the research discussion there was a passionate and angry outburst with everyone talking at once describing their experiences of being asked 'where do you come from?'. The anger with which they spoke indicated how powerfully this affected them. The emotional impact is powerfully described in the quote below where the young man talks about losing his identity when he is asked these questions.

So, home, I think the simplest way is to say it is where everybody knows my name, that's home. Your mom will call you by your middle name, your mom will call you by your surname, your mom will call you, even your siblings will call you by your actual name, and there are others will call you Uncle, Big Brother, and then when you are [moving/migrating] away from there, that's where [the questions come] 'who are you again?', 'what's your name again' And there you already know, the moment, the first question 'who are you?' that is immediate for [you] ... that's not your home.

Figure 2:
Place of
origin
questions



The young people described how locals identified them as not from South Africa.

So there are certain neighbourhoods that can easily identify you as a foreign⁸ national when you get there, the way you walk, the way you talk.

The colour of your skin, darker.

Being 'different' often led to verbal and in some cases, physical bullying. Most often this took place at school.

And when I was going to school ... teachers [were] abusing me about how I look, how I talk, how I walked, where I am from. Always complaining that I cannot talk properly. [The children at school] they always used to make fun of me. So every time when I used to come back home my second uncle saw me bleeding my t-shirt with blood, then he decided I must start learning self-defence.

We discuss coping strategies, such as the learning of self-defence described above in Theme 7. What is relevant here is the fact of physical violence against the young people, a concrete manifestation of the fact that they did belong.

Theme 4: Abandonment

Most young people, again following a chronological form, followed the descriptions about arriving in South Africa with their narratives about the 'family' difficulties that they found on arriving in South Africa. They often did not even know which country they were in, many lived with people not related to them or found the adults that they had been sent to live with had lives that did not include them, e.g. their fathers had married again, their grandmother was too old to look after them, their aunt did not have the means to support them. Many moved from one place to another after they arrived.

It is at this stage that their stories began to include the traumatic experiences that led to them becoming "a child in need of care" (Children's Act 38 of 2005). Some told stories of intimate violence among adults in the home, abuse by 'relatives' and neglect and abandonment by caregivers. Not all of the group described this part of their lives, some chose not to talk about it at all, many used a simple phrase such as "everything looks perfect the next thing you see everything is chaotic", or "[When I made my zine] I did not think of all of that stuff" suggesting that it was too painful to talk about. Those who did talk about this time in their lives expressed a sense of abandonment.

My father did not want me. So I left. Now I just don't worry what people say about me. I just be myself. So I just be myself wherever I go.

I was a 'I do not care' type of person when I was young. Living with my mom I was never also free, you know, I was locked up. I did not like being around people. I think the fact that I was never allowed to be out, talk to people, do this with people, I became ... I kept to myself. I did not know how to be with people, my kind, people I did not know how to be with them ... the life we lived was not good.

The zines at this point were often more telling than the discussion of the impact of the experiences they had at this time on their lives. The pages included, for example, images of broken buildings that symbolised a broken life, a whole page painted with thick black paint, a figure with a huge black cloud above their head.

⁸ We have not edited the young people's quotes and therefore the word 'foreigner' remains even though it is often used by South Africans as an insult.

Figure 3:
A cloud around me



The discussion-narratives then usually moved on to the process of being placed in care. Most of them were placed in care at primary school age. Only a few described this in detail many did not refer to it at all, eliding over that step in their narrative, again suggesting it was too painful to talk about. The narratives of those that did describe why they were placed in care illustrate how little they understood about the process of being taken into care.

And it got to a point where my uncle could not look after me and our neighbours actually complained, because my uncle would always leave and then I would be home alone and I would go to the neighbours to get food because I was hungry. Then our neighbours used to notice that and they were like ‘Okay, no something is not right there’, so they were called. I do not know which social workers were these, but I recall the Social Department or something, and I do not know which one was it though. And then they came over and they took me from my uncle and they moved me into a home.

Still, then we were abandoned by our father and left alone [in a rented room]. Then the landlord was like, ‘Hi bo’ (a local expression of surprise), these kids, they don’t know how to speak English, who is going to pay rent? We don’t even know anything. Next he takes us out to the police station, then they ask us, ‘who is here with you? Where is your mom, where is your dad?’ We are like, ‘I don’t know’.

None of the young people talked about anyone explaining who they were and why they were being placed in alternative care and what that meant. This is illustrated in the poignant story told by a young woman who was expecting a ‘magical’ place.

The next thing we just travel, they take us to [a suburb in Cape Town] that is where it’s written Children’s Home [name of home]. We pull up there, we just see a mansion ... I am like, ‘that will be my room, that big house there!’ Pull up, we get out our bags, this aunty is coming out we are like, ‘our cleaners’, we thought we had cleaners the next thing they tell us, ‘you will be staying with other kids’. We are like ‘What! You said we were having our own house’.

The quotes below are illustrative of the emotional impact of the circumstances that led to them being placed in alternative care and the process of moving into a CYCC.

You can see holes here in this heart [pointing to his drawing]. So, things happened to me... is like someone taking a knife, stab in the heart, things like that.

Figure 4:
A stab in the heart



I was floating, I do not know where do I belong. I was happy I had a children's home. But was I really the little girl that wanted to stay in a children's home? There was love. There was everything there. But where is my mom? My mom abandoned me.

I am not going to get into a lot of details about [circumstances that led to being placed in care]. It was because for me the biggest heartbreak from anyone is from your parents, if parents can damage a child, it takes you... you literally live with it for the rest of your life. So, I think I live with it for a very long time.

I felt like I was in a dark hole and could not get out ... I became a lone wolf.

Another described that even though his foster mother cared he still felt he did not belong in her family and home.

One of the things [I felt] is confused, seeking for help, help me. I am hopeless, I am searching to find someone or something and questioning my life. Also it is because at home [his foster home] I do not feel like, I had support, I do not want to lie, but I do not feel like they understood me the way that I wanted to be understood. I am not going to lie, I did not feel loved in that sense of where 'You are my kid', so it just felt like 'Yes you are just staying with me, yes whatever'. It was just jeez it is... I love the woman though because I stay with her now, now I kind of see like yes [she did care for me], but back then I felt like now this lady does not care about love she is just there because I am just here. So, she did not show me the love that I feel like I needed from a parent.

These narratives reflect a deep sense of not belonging of "floating", "searching to find someone" and emotional vulnerability "holes in the heart". Significantly these feelings were still with them in the present as we worked with them, in young adulthood in spite of the fact that most of them were placed in care in childhood.

Related to this vulnerability is the emergence of a theme that as we had not expected but looking at psychological research on displacement, loss and experience of traumatic events is not surprising (Donald et al., 2014). Many of them when talking about their early lives in South Africa described how they became "bad", how their behaviour became anti-social (Wicks-Nelson & Israel, 2003) once they reached pre-adolescence. Narratives such as the one below were told by at least half of the group, young men and young women.

Yes, I started doing bad things in Grade 2, started fighting with a few friends, trying to look cool. Yes, I was very naughty. And then I got to Grade 4 and my life was really sinking because I was using drugs. Almost every week my mom, (my foster care mom) would get a call from my school saying, 'Hey, please come and get your child because he is not listening.' At that time, that age I did not really know anything and at the same time I was trying to fit in with this group of friends of mine. Grade 5 came in, still doing the same thing, not listening. I was passing but with bad marks. And then Grade 6 came in and that is the year where my life just sunk, it sunk really bad because that year I would bunk school, I would go to the beach with my friends, yes, yes, do no naughty stuff, not listen.

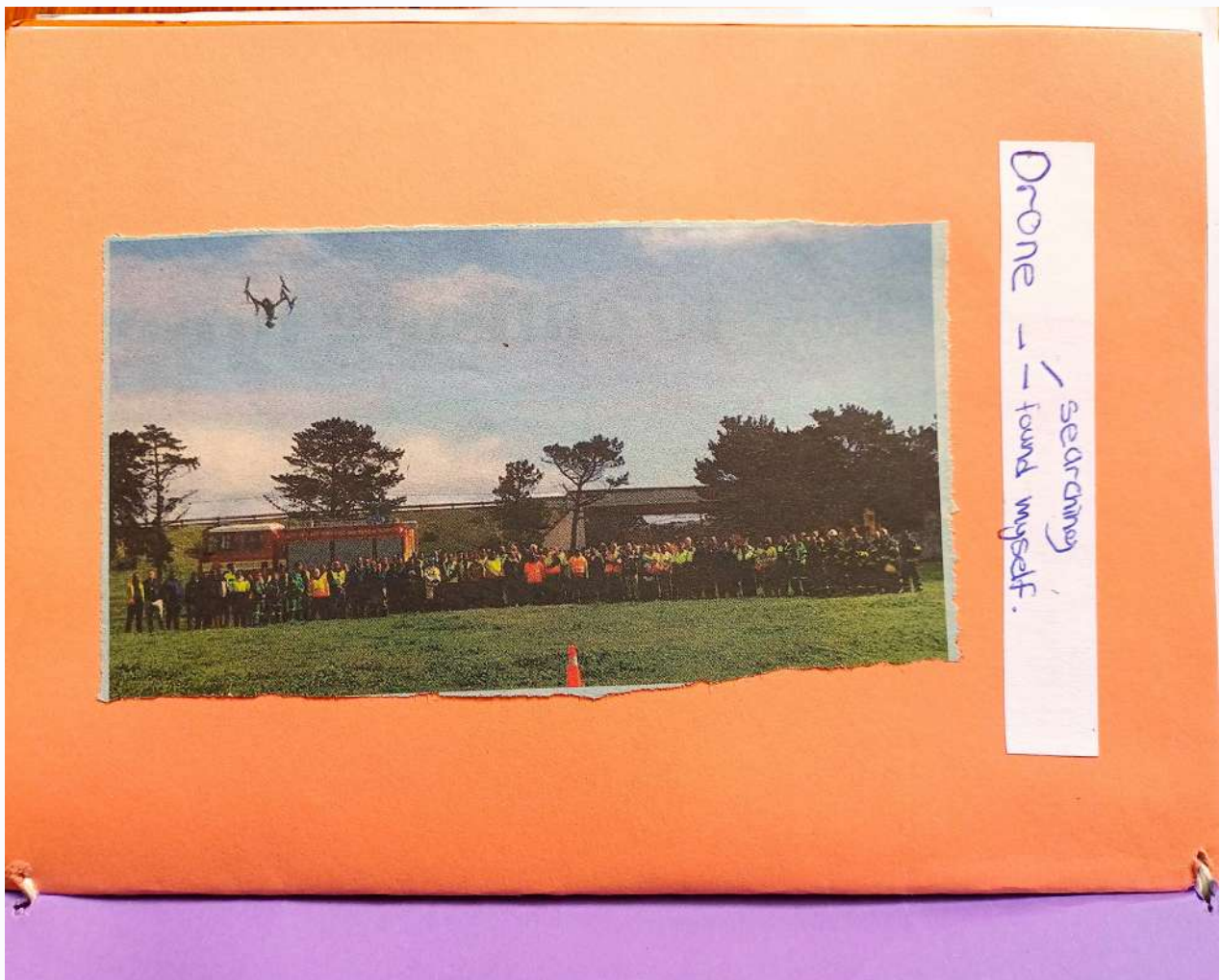
What followed this narrative of negative behaviour were stories of choice to change. Almost all of those who described their antisocial behaviour described how they came to a particular point in their lives when they realised this strategy would not serve them as they grew into adulthood. The quote below illustrates this well.

So when I failed that year, I was like, yes, I know this is not for me. No, something is not right.

For some this epiphany was linked to their search for who they really were. One young man used a photograph of a drone in his zine to symbolise his searching for himself during this time of chaos in his life.

There is a picture of a drone [on my zine]. So, what does the drone stand for? It stands for my role, searching for myself. Because usually when you ... use a drone to see things [it travels in the air] to ask what is there? A drone symbolises that I am trying to find myself.

Figure 5: The drone searches



Some described it as an internal process or realisation, others described how outside influences had helped them rethink their behaviour and in fact to choose another identity. One young man described how he found a sense of belonging (though it led to isolating behaviour) that changed his “bad” behaviour through finding Animé. Animé is a particular genre of animation of Japanese origin usually with futuristic or fantasy themes. For this young man this fantasy place was the only world in which he felt he belonged.

I just lost myself and stayed in my room the whole day. Then I was given a gift – anime, animations. I watched them every day, every night when I came back from school, I never go out, they made me happy, cry, laugh, sad, all of the emotions I saw. I wished that I was in that world. The only thing that was giving me a light was animation.

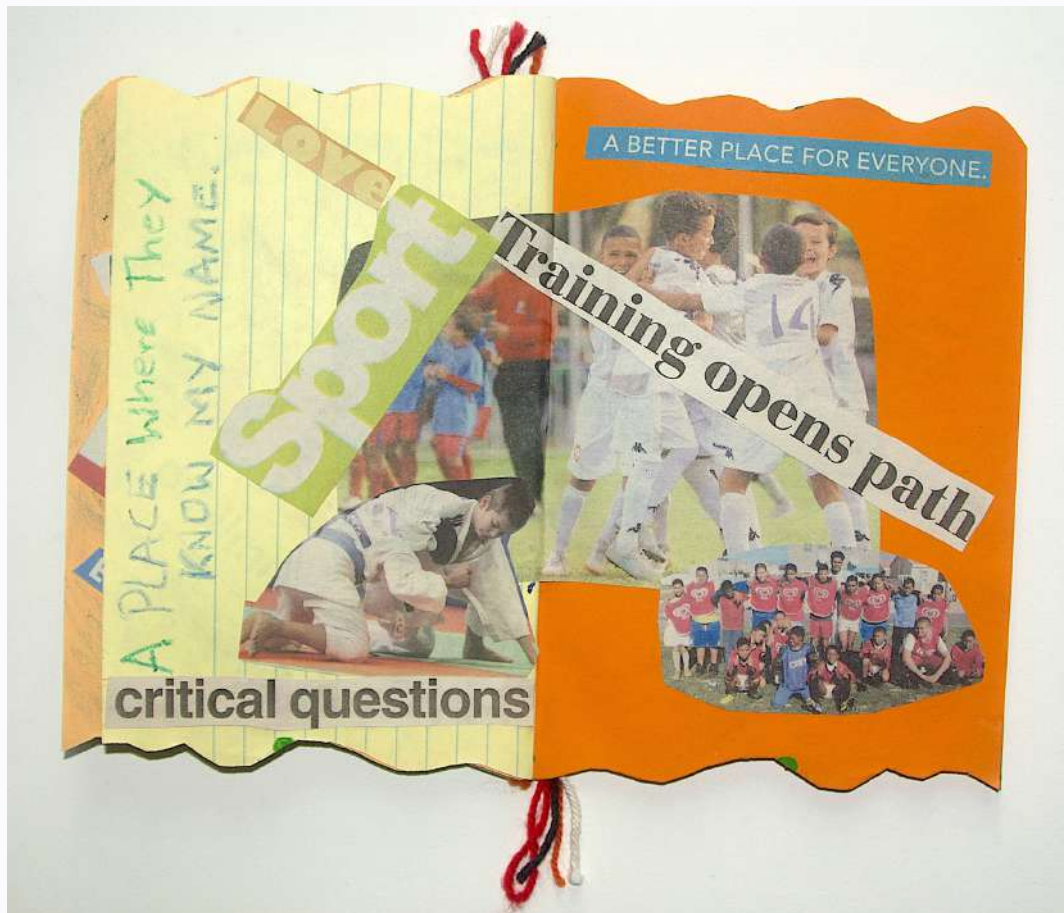
Boys in particular described how making ‘good’ friends had helped them to change. Girls and boys described how sport, especially being in a team had also brought about a change in behaviour. They described how it was their ability in the sport that gave them confidence and a sense of self-worth. If they were good players this gave them status at school, they became an insider.

My one friend showed me that yes, something is not right.

I then went to high school and I found friends, good friends which I am still friends with now, lovely friends

If you play sports, you are part of that team, you feel like you belong into that team.

Figure 6: Sports team and belonging



What is significant about these narratives is that they did choose to change, even those whose behaviour was deeply anti-social (drugs and associated gangs). This shows great inner strength. In spite of their early experiences and the areas where many lived (which were characterised by high levels of substance abuse and gang culture) they had the inner strength to change their behaviour.

They not only had the strength to 'change' and 'choose' their life trajectory they had also developed tactics for survival in a context of abandonment. These are described in Theme 7.

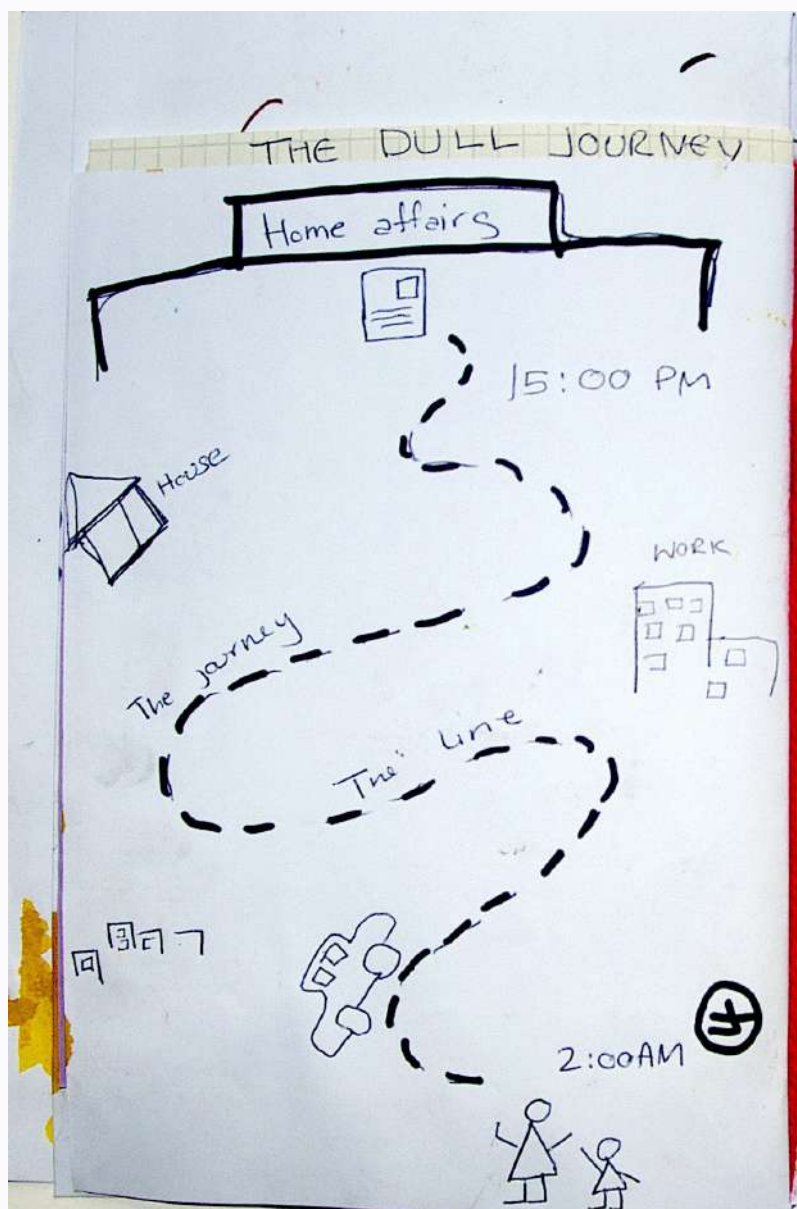
Theme 5: Early experience of documentation issues

This theme and Theme 6 below need to be read in the context of Section 3. which describes the system of documentation in South Africa.

Some of the young people described early memories of caregiver's trying to access documents. All of them described these experiences as emotionally disturbing; many recalled them in great detail. They described the long queues they and their caregivers stood in to access asylum or refugee documentation. They recounted how migrants were treated with disrespect (and even violence) by security guards while in the queue, for example making xenophobic comments, shouting at people to move on. They also narrated stories of rude and indifferent officials. This, along with their witnessing the loss of dignity of their parents, had clearly etched the experience in their minds.

So here I have drawn a map [in my zine] and I called it the 'dull journey', and it starts here [she points to a long road she has drawn on her zine] I remembered it from my childhood where my mom would wake me up at 02:00 in the morning to get ready for Home Affairs and I hated it so much and it is like this journey, this line also represents how long the lines were at Home Affairs and you are just standing there and you are being treated so horribly.

Figure 7: A young person's dull journey



Now we have to rush and go sleep there [in the queue] at the Home Affairs office, we come out from P (a distant area). I had to bring my siblings, we would sit at night there, the line is not moving, we come here just to sit in the cold and then no one helps us. They just walk past us. You will see my parents running, touching the guy's feet just for... it is really frustrating to see my brother and sister and my mom going through something like (she begins to cry). Sorry.

In spite of these experiences they all agreed that at this stage they had no idea how important documents were for their present and future lives.

You have to wake up so early and queue [at Home Affairs]. And that was maybe eight or nine years ago that this used to happen often, every time I would go with my mom, and I never really understood what it meant until I never had it [a document].

Though some had these early memories they had no understanding of why documents were important. They were now angry, particularly with caregivers, that they had not talked to them about the importance of documents when they were young. Some recounted how the issue was not dealt with when they were taken into alternative care. Once they arrived at the CYCC some had received due care but the process of accessing documents was so lengthy that they had turned 18 before the documents had been accessed. A few young people were particularly angry with social workers who explained nothing and did not begin the work

to access documents until it was too late; they suggested that the staff of some CYCCs did not know how important documents were for migrant children. In some of their cases the institutions they lived in only thought about documents once they reached 16 or 17 and their move out of alternative care was being planned.

I was at the centre since 2014 until 2021. And there, when I was in the centre, they didn't really worry about my papers and stuff because they thought 'agh you know what you have plenty of time' 'oh no you're sorted'. When I was at fifteen and sixteen, I thought that I live in a centre I go to court every two years my papers are sorted. And then I was seventeen, eighteen years old and I basically didn't have anything.

Many said that when the issue was attended to by the CYCC home it was too late. All of this at a time when they had reached early adulthood and had begun to think about their future selves. One young woman describes her realisation of how restricted her life would be without papers

I mean at some point I was undocumented, around sixteen, and then when I was told the situation I was in, then everything was like, 'oh my gosh, I am finishing high school, what am I going to do, who is going to give me a bursary, how will I afford to study?' Those thoughts were ... I struggled to sleep because I thought about it a lot and no one was there to fix it for me.

Theme 6: Not being documented now – practical and emotional impact

Practical impact

The most dominant theme that emerged and the one that raised the most intense emotion for all of the participants was the fact that lack of documentation meant they could not access the opportunities that young adults need to progress in life. The participants all had different status situations and processes that they needed to follow to access documents. These situations had arisen because of their different case histories and relationships with caregivers.

One of the young people had been helped by the CYCC were they had lived to access refugee status, some had an asylum permit, some had no documentation at all, not even a birth certificate. A few were waiting for an asylum permit or refugee status applied for by the CYCC to be confirmed. Some had been waiting for these documents for years. The young woman speaking below describes how she had to try different routes to access documents.

I will not lie, it was a hell of a ride because my mom when she [left me] my papers were expired [the CYCC] told [my mother] to come and 'You have to fix your kid's paper'. I cannot do it because I do not have the fingerprint [on the asylum paper], it is hers. But she did not want anything to do with me anymore. So, we had to go through that whole process of separating me, opening a new case. All that up and down it is exhausting. I am still getting too emotional, there were a lot of things going on in me because I do not understand that whole process. And getting your case [applying for refugee status] rejected and then I had to be an asylum, which I hate. I do not want to walk around with an A4 [the asylum permit is not a card or book but a simple paper page], I really do not want to do that, no I always wanted to have an ID, have the basic things.

Essentially what these young people are describing is being "lost in care" (Sloth-Nielsen & Ackermann, 2016) which is a product of non-recognition of the existence and needs of unaccompanied migrant children taken into alternative care and the lack of legislation to deal with their situation. This is discussed further in the analysis of the data. The quote below from one of the young people describes eloquently the injustice of being "lost in care".

I thought that I live in a centre (government CYCC). I go to court every two years, surely the minimum is that my papers are sorted. I am basically a child of the government then surely all those papers are supposed to be there.

The group discussions and zines described the practical barriers that stood in their way to



continuing with productive adult lives. These include not being able to access employment, write examinations, apply for bursaries, participate in sports, get a driver's licence, have a bank account, travel to other countries and at times they even face detention and deportation. The quotes below describe the practical barriers. We have included many quotes here to give a picture of the range of barriers young people in their position face.

I go to a place to apply for a job. Hi this is my CV, I am ready to work, and the next thing they tell you 'where is your paper?' At the clinic you just say, 'I am injured, can you help me? Where is your paper?' You go to the police, I want to lay a complaint about someone touched me, someone wanted to rape me, 'where is your paper?'

My friend just got arrested because they caught him without a paper. I cannot go see him because as soon as I get there, they will ask me 'where is yours?'

You need to study, you need to do these things. Universities, bursaries!

I did not know anything until I reached Matric and then they say we need to bring our IDs for registration for examination, and I was like 'oh, I do not think I have that.'

I needed my documents in order to play this soccer tournament but they said they needed my real identity in order for them to register me for that tournament. So, then I couldn't play, I was kicked out of the tournament, out of the squad.

Your documentation defines what type of job you get.

I tried to get a driver's license, they told me, 'oh no you need to wait until your permanent residence comes out.' I tried to wait. I tried to get a bank account, I wanted to do a few things online, and they just went, 'oh no you need to wait for the process to be finished.'

I was like, 'Oh my God! You can't have the banking app when it's not opened with a South African ID.'

I don't have a banking app so I am unable to see how much I have in my account, I am unable to put some of my money into a savings, to be able to send someone money. That's one of the struggles that has come through having only a certain document [an asylum seeker document].

I was offered a job on a cruise ship to be a personal trainer but I cannot go.

Emotional impact

The quotes above all come from a discussion we had about documents, prompted by one young person describing a piece of artwork in his zine but picked up quickly by the rest of the group. The discussion was animated with everyone speaking at the same time with real anger and frustration for example, "...just because of a piece of paper!"

A few talked about sleepless nights spent worrying about their futures.

[Worrying] often makes it hard for you to sleep that quality sleep. You can't sleep, you just sleep trying to think 'how I'll manage this?'

They also expressed a feeling of being invisible. Given that identity-creation at this age is closely linked to emotional wellbeing both in the present and the future (Gonzales & Suárez-Orozco, 2013) their feeling of being "a ghost" "invisible" illustrates their deep vulnerability.

If you have documents then you are a person, before that you are invisible.

It [not having documents] made me feel I was ghost. I was a ghost.

It is like I am here but nobody sees me.

The emotional impact goes beyond being invisible, though it affects their very sense of "being human".

You feel you are not human.

Defining oneself as a “a ghost”, “invisible”, not even human, suggests a huge emotional impact as well as a deep sense of non-identity. Linked to the idea of not being human without documents is the feelings described by those who had accessed some form of documentation. Documents made them feel like a human who needed to be treated with respect and included.

When I got my ID I felt like now I could be treated with dignity and respect.

But the moment you have proven yourself, once you have that document [people in South Africa] say ‘okay you have proven yourself to be like one of us and therefore I will treat you like everyone else’. So, it is almost like if you don’t have that, it is like you don’t deserve to be here.

Linked to the emotional impact was the way that the young people described their loss of agency as others decided their future.

So I am literally just stuck. I am sitting without a choice, I am living in the space without a choice, I don’t have a choice.

It is like we are a book, we are not moving.

The quote above describes feeling like an inanimate object (a book) that cannot move. This suggests a deep sense of powerlessness. Referring again to (Jackson, 1995) who suggests we feel that we belong (are at home) when we are able to control that which is in our world, there is no control expressed here. What reinforces the young people’s sense of powerlessness and their feeling that they ‘carry no weight’ is their experience of interaction with officials at Home Affairs in their quest for documents.

They just put their hands in the air ... ‘it is not my problem’.

All I was told was, ‘wait, there is a process’.

My papers got expired and we went to Home Affairs but they said they can’t renew it. And then when we went to go renew it, they said we should come on a certain day, then we went again, then they kept on sending us back and forth the whole time.

You need to wait until your permanent residence comes out. I tried to wait. Waiting, waiting for my future to begin to live a normal life.

How many times do we go to Home Affairs, they tell you, ‘come back next month’, next month comes, the same thing, over and over.

Next week, next of next week, next month.

As the quotes above illustrate visits to Home Affairs were an often repeated part of their lives and reinforced their powerlessness and eroded their sense of identity. One young woman had accepted her powerlessness and completely given up.

Without it [a document] there are so many restrictions, so for me I do not like that, but I think I stopped caring you know. I [will] probably move [or] I will probably marry someone from this country. That is the hope I have.

To end this section of the report we quote the poignant words of a quiet young man who had said very little during the workshops. As he stood up to show us his zine he pointed to a large piece of blue tissue paper he had pasted at the end of the artwork.

I do not get my documents but I never lose hope. See this blue tissue. It is the sea ... I would like to be a fish because in the sea there is no border. If all of us we can get that privilege, that freedom like a fish you would not be behind bars blocked because you are an asylum seeker.

Figure 8: In the sea I would be free



Theme 7: Coping strategies

The young man who wished he was a fish in a sea without borders begins his narrative by saying “I never lose hope”. Though not a strong emergent theme there are small threads of evidence about coping strategies, ways to survive.

Many of the boys identified having “good” friends as a tactic for emotional survival. It was a friend who had helped many of them escape their negative behaviour. It was clear that one small group of friends who attended the research workshop had a deep supportive relationship that included much laughter, joking and the bantering that characterises young men. One young man described that it was important to have “a proper circle around you like people that you know.” For him his volunteer work in a local NGO gave him the sense of belonging he had felt nowhere else since he had left home.

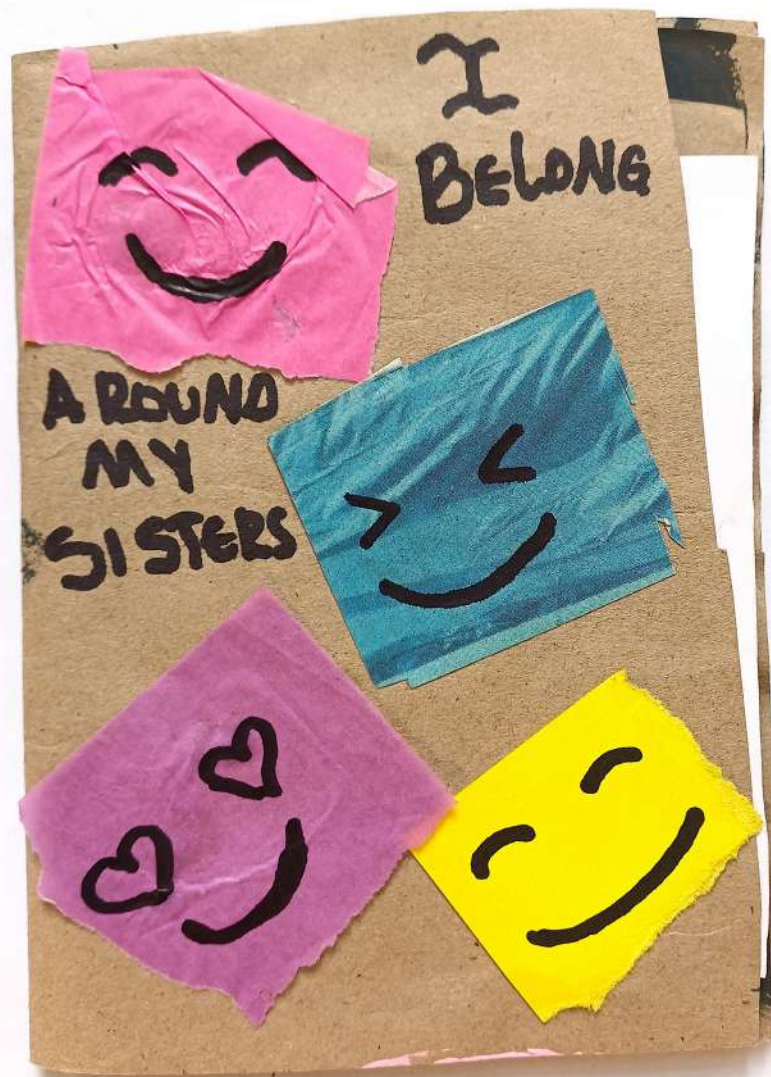
As discussed earlier the circle’s the young people (young men and women) had found helpful were sport’s teams or simply participating in sports. One young man described the theatre group he was involved with as his ‘circle’. A few of the young people participated in martial arts which was somewhere they felt they belonged. Activities were described as places of inclusion; South Africans accepted them if they played sport alongside them. They were also a source of identity; they were not only ‘migrants’ but a basketball or a football player, an actor. The discussions about activities showed that they “took stress away”, they were an emotional release. Some had sought solitary ways of coping, the young man who watched Animé films and the young man who went walking into nature, for example.

The discussions around finding tactics for wellbeing, particularly among the young men, contrasted starkly with the powerlessness they expressed in their childhood and ‘care’ narratives and with their narratives around their inability to legalise their lives in South Africa.

There was a distinct gender difference in this emergent theme. Only few of the young woman participated in sports or other activities. The young women did not see friends as a support. They described that having lived in a children’s home meant they avoided forming too close a bond with other girls as they did not trust them (see Theme 3 16-18 year olds). They felt being too open would lead to gossip. During the workshop two of the girls asked to tell the stories of their zines stories alone because they did not want other people who knew them to know their stories. Two of the young women described how their siblings were their support.

My mom abandoned me and my dad [also abandoned me] ... so I stick to my three sisters ... I always had it (a special bond) with my younger sister.

Figure 9: Three sisters



Young women described more solitary activities that helped them to cope such as reading and watching television series.

In conclusion to this section on emergent themes from the 18-25 year old group it is clear that the young people's lives, in spite of their strategies for coping and their actual survival within a toxic past and present landscape, deeply affects their sense of identity and belonging. Section 10 analyses the narratives that are presented above in relation to the research questions.

3.2 FINDINGS FROM 16-18 YEAR OLDS

The workshop experience and content that emerged from the 16-18 year old group was very different from the older group. The younger group talked far less readily, at one point the researchers decided to use a cut-out figure representing a young person in care to allow the group to talk about their lives in a non-personal, third person way. Specific personal narratives were rare and the tone too was different, muted, tinged with sadness and guarded. The findings are presented under the following sub-themes:

Theme 1: Finding my identity

Theme 2: What contributes to feeling as if I do not belong

Theme 3: Emotional state and protection of self

Theme 4: Documentation

Theme 1: Finding my identity

In line with research and theory (e.g. Erikson, 1968) around the preoccupation with identity formation within this age group, one of the strong emergent themes from the 16-18 group shows young people in the process of defining their identity.

I just want to try discover myself.

I feel like it [who I am] is still to be discovered.

These comments could be characteristic of any young person their age but in this group it was clear that fracture and loss of connection had negatively affected natural psychosocial processes. The following stark expressions of unbelonging, which are characteristic of much of what the young people said, gives an understanding of the extent of this.

Being alone is where I belong.

Figure 10: I am alone in the world



I do not feel I belong anywhere. I do not belong here, I am not from here. I am nowhere. I am not from this country. I am not from this planet. I just feel like I do not belong anywhere.

The following themes explore this state of unbelonging and the complexities associated with it.

Theme 2: What contributes to feeling as if we do not belong

One of the patterns that emerged when analysing the data from the 16-18 year old group was the fact that much of what the young people discussed could be grouped into a theme exploring the factors that contributed to their sense of not belonging anywhere. Each factor that emerged is discussed in a sub-theme below.

Being an outsider

Though this was not as strong a theme as those discussed below the active hostility towards them as migrants by South Africans was one of the reasons the young people felt they did not belong in South Africa. Firstly they described that people identify them as different, as someone from another country because of outer characteristics.

One thing that makes you feel like you do not belong is the way people look at you, it is obvious the way you look ... they are able to tell that I am a foreigner instead of a South African because I have braids. The minute I have braids, then I am considered a foreign national and my skin colour. [Also] because maybe of the language, her accent which plays a part compared to someone who actually speaks like a citizen. It is how she talks, how she dresses.

The young woman above painted the first page of her zine with a thick black paint and pasted small braids plaited from wool on the black paint.

The black is the skin colour. It is the skin colour. That is how they see it.

Figure 11: Skin colour



Linking identity to a deeply personal physical characteristic such as skin colour has to affect a young woman's identity formation (Mbatha, 2016) and sense of belonging. The thick nature of the paint, which contrasts with much of her zine, may say something about the depth of emotion that this label of 'very black' evoked for her.

The other experience that made the young people feel like they did not belong was the abusive name-calling they experienced from South Africans. This happened most often at school. The discussion below about names was one of the few times the group had an animated interactive discussion.

- They have names for them [us], like *gweja*⁹.
- Yes, coloured people would say bongo, bongo.
- When it is actually happening you are 'oh flip it man!'. It is literally... you feel terrible, like why are they calling me all these names?
- Yes, like they are shooting guns on you.
- And there is no way... to defend yourself.
- Because that also affects you...
- That is the one word that [I] never used to like, but then if I make a scene about it...
- You know there is a song of that [names for foreigners] actually?
- Yes, there is a song of that.
- They made a song of that.
- I never used to like it, I can't even listen to it, if you play it for me, I would look at you like you are very stupid.

As the quote above illustrates name-calling had a deep emotional impact on the young people, "Yes, like they are shooting guns on you." Additionally the sense of powerlessness expressed in the unfinished phrases related to being unable to defend themselves is strong. They knew if they try to defend themselves the bullying would escalate. This inability to respond resonates with Jackson's work (1995) quoted previously where not feeling at home is linked to being "unable to control the everyday ... activities ... in their world" (p. 123).

Alongside talking about xenophobia there was more than one discussion about prejudice related to race, in fact it was mentioned more often than xenophobic prejudice. They talked about the privilege of white people over black people, in relation to wealth, access to jobs and treatment by guards and police. They felt that white people were privileged in South Africa and one reason they were not accepted was but because they were black.

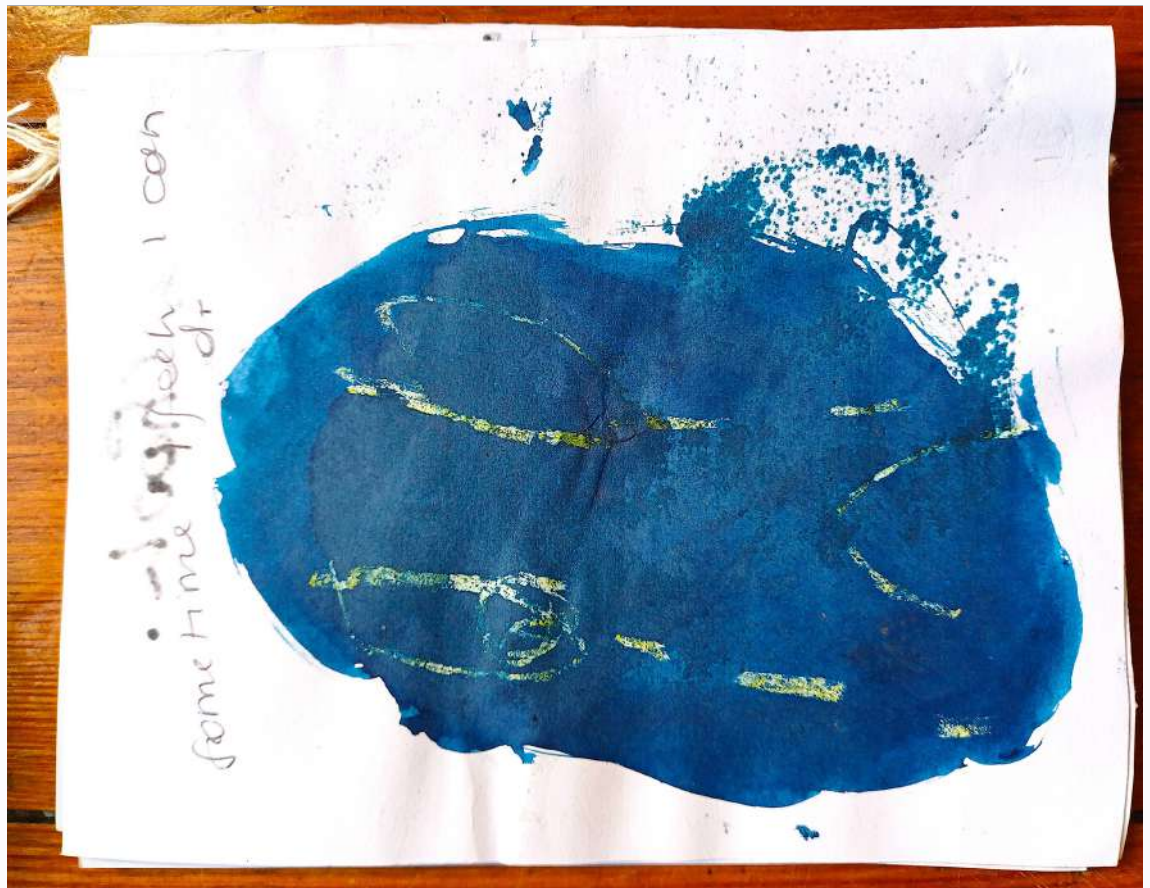
In my experience, when I was in Durban, I was in a bid for a competition and then they would not open the gate, so we were intercepted by a white male that was at the gate and then the first question they will ask us, 'what is that you are doing here?' and stuff like that, but at the same time I have seen my competitors that are also entering without being questioned and I just feel like sometimes it is just like a whole racial thing.

Difficult past experiences

The strongest theme to emerge from this group dealing with past painful experiences of violence, abandonment or loss of family attachment. This theme was most often expressed in the zines, for example a deep blue painted face with a sad mouth and tears, jagged lines of paint filling the cover of the zine, a cloud with rain, a black sun, a page painted dark grey with chaotic, unconnected brush strokes of coloured paint.

⁹ An offensive name in the local language for migrants, particularly migrants who are seen as 'illegal'.

Figure 12:
The sad face

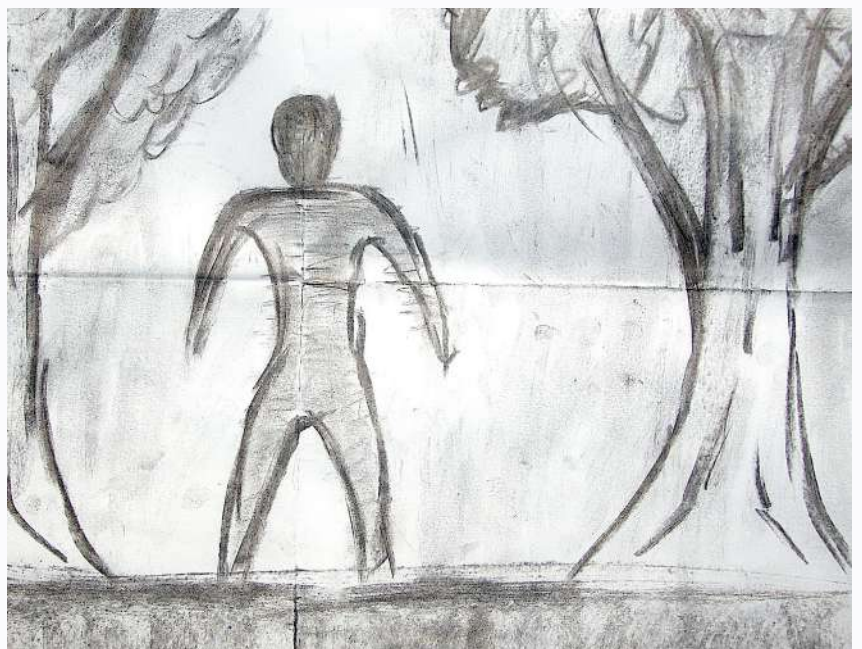


The deep emotions associated with these images were described in a concrete manner without reference to what they symbolised. This group of young people did not give any details about past experience or why they had been placed in a children's home. This process was mostly represented in short phrases or intimations. The quotes below are typical.

And then also another thing when it comes to belonging ... there has been some kind of issues at home that leads to some kind of distance from our parents.

This [a drawing in his zine] shows that there was a separation [from him and his mother] and it continues this way.

Figure 13: Mother and child holding hands and Figure 14: Young person separated from family



This [referring to a page in his zine where he has pasted tape] is just tape to represent also the scars, the pain, like the traumas that we have been through, difficulties.

Figure 15:
Life's difficult
moments



The tone was one of defended feelings i.e. the experiences were too painful to articulate. This is discussed in more detail in the analysis of the data, Section 10. Looking at the pages the young people are describing above gives some sense of the pain and confusion they felt.

'Losing' family

One of the most difficult past experiences that created the deep emotional 'darkness' evident in the zines was described by them as 'losing' family. It was clear that the experiences that led to them being placed in alternative care had left scars that they still carried and expected to go with them into their futures. One young man asked "why does everyone keep leaving?"

I want to be with my family. I know my circumstances, but at the same time I want to be with my family

And since it is about belonging, I wrote 'my parents' and that is where I would say I feel that I most belong, like everyone said, regardless of the place where we are, as long as we [family] are all together ... that is where I belong. I drew myself ... being carried along with our mother. The reason why I chose a contrast of colours [on the two drawings], is to show though we are moving forward and we are all together there is an unknown future. This just shows that there was going to be a separation in some sort of way later on and [it still] continues this way.

I was raised in a family that did not feel like it is my home, it did not feel like they are my family although they are my family.

The experience of being abandoned had been so painful that a few young people talked about choosing not to know their families, cutting them out of their lives.

The front [page of my zine] is the family tree and there are not really names and stuff on [this] family tree. The usual family tree would have names of the family but I did not put mine, not because I do not have a family, but because I do not think they have

impacted anything in my life except for my sisters, my sisters are here and the rest are just dead [to me].

Figure 16: Family tree



Another common theme in the young people's descriptions of their zines and the discussions was how not knowing anything about their family background affected their sense of belonging.

When you talk about belonging, you have not explored much of who the other [family members] are out there. You know this is your mother ... but you do not know who is her aunt, who is her father, who are all those other people? And you have not much explored to know exactly can I belong to these people, or do I even fit in with them? In some cases we just do not know. Like myself, I do not remember my dad that much and I cannot say that [this is what I have inherited from him] on me. So, it is... there is that barrier in the distance from not knowing where is it that you can belong.

A few young people did have contact with families and identified them as "where I belong". The contrast between the quote below and those above highlights how abandonment affects a sense of belonging.

I just want to share where I belong. I feel like I belong when I am with my, my sisters because I have four sisters and when I am with them ... I feel safe around them. It [will soon be] time to go back with them (referring to the fact that she will soon be 18 and leave the children's home) and I feel very happy to go back with them. So yes, time is coming, I am going to be with them again.

Being in a Children's home

Some of the young people acknowledged that their move to a children's home had helped them.

I did not even have friends when I was back home. I always had to ... take care of my brother and I [seldom] ... have that chance to go play ... [but here in the children's home] everybody comes with their own problems and I feel like we get to fix the problems and I love the fact that I see different people from different countries and having this talking that we do.

One young woman described how she "felt a failure" because she lived in a children's home.

Most, however, expressed an ambivalence, they knew they were cared for but described the inevitable institutional character of a children's home and the fact that it was 'not home'.

[At] the children's home, I feel like I do belong and at the same time I do not. When I say I belong it is because they have given me what I need. They are giving me the basic things in life, like going to school, having food, having a bed and stuff and that [makes] you feel like you belong. But on the other side I do not belong there because this is not my family. I want to be with my family. I know my circumstances, but at the same time I want to be with my family and not with people that I am forced to wake up with every day and I cannot ... get out of my house, because it is not mine.

I feel also I do not belong because I do not do what I enjoy to do. I do what they tell me to do. I have to follow the rules and to do things and I do not eat what I like cooking.

Living with a number of other people, which again, is inevitable also affected some young people.

- So I put the picture of somebody alone here [on my zine]. I feel like where I belong is when I am in my own space. I am not the person who necessarily socialises ... I do not like people, but I tolerate people ... I feel like when I am in my own space I just get to be there and do what I want and in that space I can journal, I am more reserved. I am true to myself, there is peace, there is love and there is many other things that I do when I am on my own.

Researcher: How much chance do you get for that?

- Not a lot. Because I live with 26 people!

One strong theme that emerged from the young women was that they did not want to speak about their lives because they did not trust others in the group, who lived with them in the children's home, not to gossip. At one point in the workshop one young woman said she would tell her story if she could tell it alone. She described a culture of gossip amongst the young women in the home in which she lived. We suggested she take a mobile phone and page through her zine and record the story it told. This could be one of the reasons for the muted tone of the workshop and why almost no detailed stories of personal lives were told. The issue of trust is explored further in Theme 3 below.

Theme 3: Emotional state and protection of self

Though there was not much talk about the details of their lives, many described their emotional state, which, as we discuss above, they most often linked to their past. They then, in turn, linked their emotional state to their sense of belonging. The quote below, though it describes a more troubled psychological response than most of the descriptions, illustrates this well.

So, for me, the reason why I feel like I do not belong anywhere around here is because ... I have seen a lot and just anything can trigger me. So maybe you say something that reminds me of... or maybe say a voice or a clap or... that just triggers me. I feel like I am still trapped in the same space, no matter the distance or anywhere I go, I just feel it is still the same thing with those voices and those things playing inside my head.

One strong theme that emerged was the fact that the response to their past experiences was

often to shut their feelings down. This process is very clearly described in the quote below.

So I have learnt not to say things as it is going to end up leading to me being hurt or me questioning myself, because then when I question myself I am messing with my peace and when I mess with my peace then I feel depression. It is all this stress and thinking, who am I and what do I want, and why does everyone keep leaving? So, I do not want to question myself like that. So, in some way I will be fine and walk on, and that is it.

Linked to this was discussion about how they had learned not to trust anyone.

Nobody was there when I was going through hard times. So, it is very hard to open up and I think that is where trust issues come in, seeing how things were back then when you are all alone.

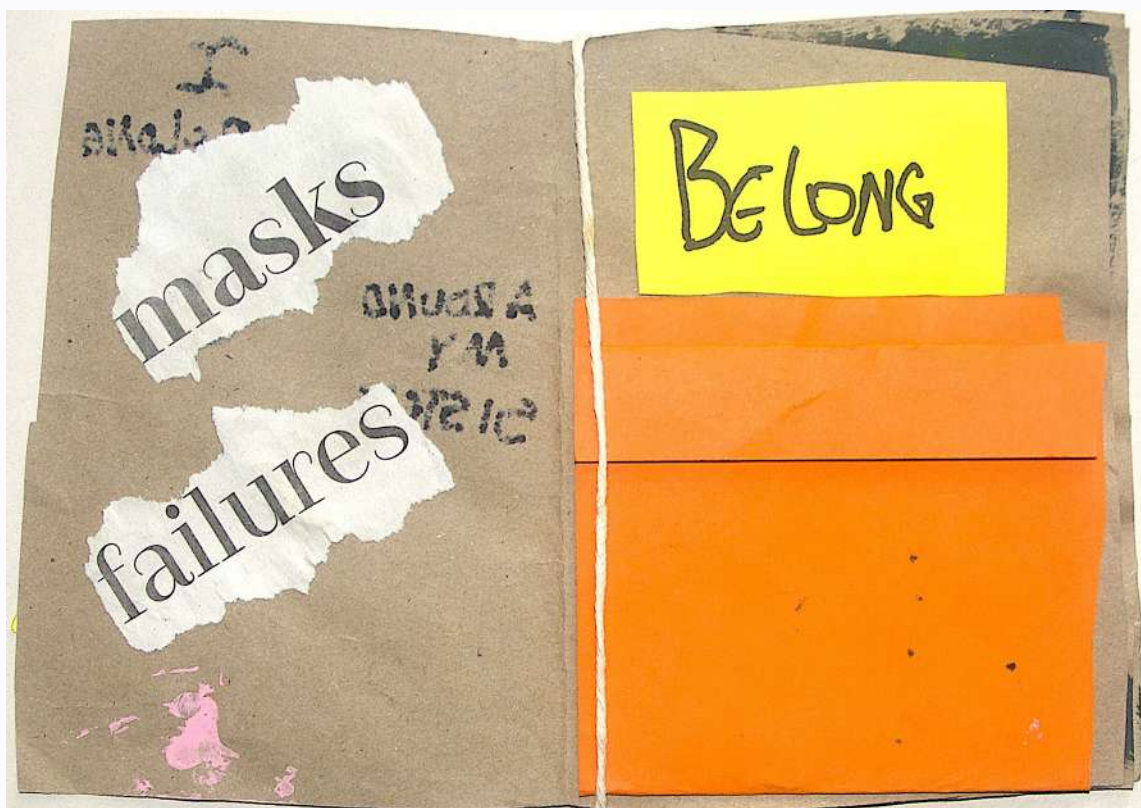
I feel because of what I have experienced ... when I meet new people I do not necessarily engage with them because I have big trust issues because I am scared of being disappointed. So, I would rather not be disappointed by keeping my distance, than being disappointed and trying to build a relationship with someone. Honestly, I would not mind just being on my own, possibly, for a couple of months, just so that I do not have to worry too much about my surroundings and what I have to do, the expectation from the world.

Withholding trust was one strategy employed in response to past experiences. Another common strategy described by a few of the young people was to 'wear a mask'.

Last year when I went to school, I was not really good in English. So, it was very hard for me to speak in front of people, and I just pretended but when I go back to [the children's home] I start crying.

At some point in front of people you think if I [show my feelings] then everything is going [to go] wrong. [You are putting] on a mask in front of people, when you are hiding something from them, like something that you are going through, something that you just do not want anyone to see. I just ... smile and keep everything as normal as possible ... and you let it go [but] it is suffering and pain and everything that you have been feeling.

Figure 17: Masks and failures



Though many of the quotes under this theme suggest that it was past traumatic experience that had impacted most on emotional wellbeing there was some suggestion that issues of documentation also affected the sense of belonging in the 16-18 year old group.

Theme 4: Documentation

There was acknowledgment that documentation was important for their futures but this was far less dominant a theme as in the 18-25 year old group, nor as dominant as the discussions in the group about trust and other emotional issues. This was likely because they were still under the care of the CYCC and most had not had to face the implications of non-documentation.

Some, did describe the implications of non-documentation.

I think it [is more important] when you are going to university, because then you are not allowed at all if you do not have your documentation. And then your dreams are just shattered, and you have to go work at Shoprite, Pick n Pay.

Another young man talked about the fact that documents would become an issue when they left the protection of the children's home and they did worry about this.

People are here [in the children's home] without documents but they are living under protection, which is a court order so they are safe for now, but as soon as they leave it is not safe for them anymore. Now [when] the court order ends now they are on their own.

-I am worrying about moving [from the children's home].

Researcher: What about you others?

- Yes

- Yes, all of us,

- Yes.

- Most of us are leaving [soon].

- Yes at the end of this year, so it is kind of hectic, I mean having to be in grade 12, having to stress about that, having to stress about your family and people that you know. Then you have to stress about where am I going to stay and how am I going to stay and where am I going to work. It is a lot of pressure on you at the last year of you staying with [the children's home] that is one thing I know. There is too much pressure. I mean, for me I do not have papers, so it is hectic and you are also talking about papers as well. Yes, then obviously you start questioning yourself like where do I belong and all this thoughts come.

Apart from the comment in the quote above the young people in this group did not link documentation with belonging.

4. ANALYSIS

This study sought to answer the following questions:

- How do migrant youth who have recently left alternative care or are about to leave care in the near future understand and experience 'belonging'?
- How do the past experiences that led to them being placed in alternative care affect their ability to navigate belonging in South Africa?
- What is their experience of accessing documentation and what impact does the process have on their sense of identity and emotional wellbeing?
- What impact does legal insecurity have at an everyday level in relation to school, work, social relationships and their functioning as contributing citizens?

LIFE

Experien



And God said, Let the waters bring forth abundantly the moving creature that hath life — GENESIS 1



ACE OF
believe that can
the write support

THE WORLD
AS WE

LuSaka
N'Daya

Woodstock Town
CAPE TOWN



Samora
Haine Park

Nanyka
Windhoek

DRC
ZAMBIA
RSA

Mameloni

Lawrence
Hurse

- What facilitates their sense of belonging and what hinders it?
- What strategies do they apply to negotiate living in a place where they are constantly reminded that they do not belong?

The analysis is built around answering these questions in relation to the emergent themes. The figure at pag. 46 summarises the findings and the key points of analysis.

4.1 GENERAL REFLECTION

Overall, what the data indicates is that a state of ‘feeling that one belongs’ is affected by a multiplicity of phenomena such as experiences, people, places, language and legal status. The past seems to be equally important as the present in building a sense of belonging or unbelonging and the formation of a positive identity that would allow the young people who participated in this study to be happy and contributing adults.

A second overall understanding is that though some of the young people do have small spaces where they feel they belong (with their sisters, when playing basketball or with a small group of close friends) the predominant experience is ‘I do not belong anywhere’.

The above reflections apply to the 16-18 year olds and the 18-25 year olds even though they are in very different contexts. The young group, in the care of beneficent institutions, are preoccupied by struggling to deal with their pasts and finding their place in the world of the institutions where they live. The older group are thinking about finding their adulthood (some with inner strength, some without) out in the world, in a largely hostile environment that stands in the way of the future they wish for. Yet, both age groups express the fact that ‘I do not belong anywhere’.

This suggests that belonging is not a fixed concept, an inevitable result of being in or out of care or of being undocumented for example, but rather the result of a collective of experiences all related to particular personal experiences in their past life stories but also to the institutional reality of exclusion in their present.

4.1.1 THE PAST

As the diagram at the beginning of this section illustrates there are a whole cluster of experiences in the past that impact on the young people’s sense that they do not belong anywhere.

Pre-migration fracture 18-25 year olds

A sense of unbelonging began early in the lives of the older group (18-25). Most of them began their narratives by saying they were very young when they lived in and left their countries of origin. In spite of being young, though, almost all had narratives of fracture in their early lives. They had experienced frequent physical displacement, conflictual family situations and loss of biological parents.

Some of them expressed the wish that they knew more about their family origins. The general pattern and tone of discussion about family heritage and the gaps that existed in their understanding of their early experiences expressed a sense of ‘longing to know’. It is clear that this gap contributes to their sense that they did not belong anywhere. This longing related to people such as fathers or grandparents, what had they inherited from them in a physical sense, whether they had uncles and aunts and where they were, for example. It also related to places and experiences of childhood, they wanted to know what their lives had been like as children. They described how adults were silent when they asked questions about their past and this contributed to their confusion as a child and to their identity creation as an adult.

That they had no stories to tell of their childhoods in their country of origin is significant in the context of belonging. This significantly reduced the “subordinate stories” (White, 2005, p.13) which are the small ‘good’ memories wrapped within memory of traumatic experiences that we can draw on to (re)build our sense of self. White suggests that most often these ‘good’ memories relate to people such as a loving aunt or grandparent.

Other research (Clacherty, 2019; Rosbrook & Schweitzer, 2010) with refugee children and adults who could recall their lives in their countries of origin is full of rich, detailed stories from the past. There are memories of trees, pathways, landscapes, family gatherings, grandparents, homes and childhood activities. In Rosbrook and Schweitzer’s (2010) work adult refugees from Burma told many stories about the landscapes where they had grown up.

Memories of cherished landscapes ... become more than important links to a remembered, lost home. They ... also constitute a psychological home – a private space of retreat where emotions can be expressed and development can take place ... positive memories of home can help to create a nurturing psychic space for refugees. (p. 169)

This suggests that memories of early childhood and landscapes can contribute to recovery, wellbeing, identity and a sense of belonging. The Clacherty (2019) work also shows how memories of home can play a role in affirming a positive identity. The refugee children in the Clacherty study all made artwork and described memories of a place where they belonged and in evoking the memories, they were able to see that they were more than ‘migrants’ or ‘refugees’ – they had another identity. They had once been a loved child, in a home, with links to the earth, the people and the activities of their countries of origin. This was a reality they could draw on when creating an identity as they moved into adulthood. The young people in the present study did not have access to this resource.

The 16-18 year old group did not mention country of origin or early lives. Their narratives and their zine artwork were dominated by present experience and concerns.

Journeying

Though not talked about in any detail and referred to in artwork and discussion only by the 18-25 group, memories of journeying seem to have been largely negative and sometimes traumatic. Given the lack of detail it is difficult to say that these experiences contributed to a feeling of unbelonging but they certainly allowed them to experience exclusion (fences, hiding away and police) while still very young.

Early experiences in South Africa

Again, it was the 18-25 year old group that included images in their zines and discussed these experiences. Their early lives in South Africa were characterised by countless interactions that told them they did not belong, for all but one of the participants this began at primary school age and continued to the present. One of the main contributors to the feeling of not belonging was the question ‘Where do you come from?’. This question surrounded them, on the taxi, at school, in the store, in the neighbourhood, from young people and adults. The sense one gained of the incessant bombardment of these questions is obvious in the recordings where the young people all begin to talk at once, repeating the questions they are asked such as ‘who are you?’, ‘what language are you speaking?’ ‘where do you come from?’. It is not difficult to understand how this cacophony of questions would contribute to their sense that they did not belong.

Language, an issue they faced as soon as they arrived in South Africa, emerged as another indicator of outsider status and exclusion. There are complexities around language, for example coloured peers seemed more accepting of migrant languages than Xhosa-speaking peers did, there were language divides between speakers of different migrant languages and though

VISUAL SUMMARY OF FINDINGS



HOW DO MIGRANT YOUTH WHO HAVE RECENTLY LEFT ALTERNATIVE CARE OR ARE ABOUT TO LEAVE CARE IN THE NEAR FUTURE UNDERSTAND AND EXPERIENCE 'BELONGING'?

>> GENERAL FINDING ON A SENSE OF BELONGING

A sense of (un)belonging is:

- created by many factors along the whole life course
- influenced by all the intersecting systems in which a young person grows and develops from the broader systems of politics and the law to the inner systems of family and community



>> SPECIFIC FINDINGS ON WHAT IMPACTS A SENSE OF BELONGING

WHAT THEY SAY

1 PRE-MIGRATION EXPERIENCES

Very limited memory of past positive childhood experiences to draw on in creating identity and sense of having belonged somewhere.



"My past it is everywhere, it is scattered. I did not get the whole, full story yet"

2 JOURNEYS

Sense of threat and fear and traumatic experiences during journey



"I remember my mother used to put me in this bag ... And there were policemen who used to ride horses and there were fences"

3 EARLY LIFE IN SOUTH AFRICA

Language, constant question "where are you from?" and bullying at school indicated outsider status



"When I was going to school, teachers and children were abusing me about how I look, how I talk, how I walked, where I am from"

4 EXPERIENCES THAT LED TO THEM BEING TAKEN INTO CARE

Traumatic experiences related to people who "should have loved" them



"The biggest heartbreak from anyone is from your parents, it damages a child, you literally live with it for the rest of your life."

5 EXPERIENCE OF ALTERNATIVE CARE ENVIRONMENT

Acknowledged the care they were given but they had mixed emotions, felt 'discarded', found institutional nature of care environment hard, wanted to be in a family



"At the children's home, I feel like I do belong and at the same time I do not. I belong because they have given the basic things in life, like going to school, having food, having a bed. But on the other side I do not belong there because this is not my family"

6 LIMITED DOCUMENTATION OPTIONS FOR UNACCOMPANIED AND SEPARATED FOREIGN CHILDREN IN SOUTH AFRICA

CONCOMITANT CAUSE

LACK OF AWARENESS BY INSTITUTIONS OF IMPORTANCE OF THE PROCESSES FOR ACCESSING LEGAL STATUS

Many institutions waited until the young people were about to leave care to do anything about legal identity status.

"I was at the centre from 2014 until 2021. When I was in the centre, they didn't really worry about my papers because they thought 'agh you know what you have plenty of time' 'oh no you're sorted'. When I was at fifteen and sixteen, I thought that I live in a centre I go to court every two years my papers are sorted. And then I was seventeen, eighteen years old and I basically didn't have anything".

CONSEQUENCE

PROCESS OF ACCESSING DOCUMENTS

The process of accessing documents and the way they were treated by officials created frustration and anger.

"If you have documents then you are a person, before that you are invisible. It [not having documents] made me feel I was ghost. I was a ghost. It is like I am here but nobody sees me"

PRACTICAL IMPACT OF LACK OF IDENTITY STATUS (NO DOCUMENTS)

Impact of non-documentation had multiple impact on their ability to become functioning, contributing adults.

"When you want to go to university, you are not allowed at all if you do not have your documentation. And then your dreams are just shattered, and you have to go work at Shoprite, Pick n Pay"

CONSEQUENCES

EMOTIONAL IMPACT OF LACK OF LEGAL STATUS

Described the deep impact on their sense of identity and even personhood.

"How many times do we go to Home Affairs, they tell you, 'come back next month', next month comes, the same thing, over and over"

>> ALL THE ABOVE FACTORS LEAD TO A PROFOUND SENSE OF **UNBELONGING**

"I DON'T BELONG ANYWHERE"



>> YOUNG PEOPLE CAN AND DO DEVELOP **COPING STRATEGIES** TO NEGOTIATE LIVING IN A PLACE WHERE THEY ARE CONSTANTLY REMINDED THAT THEY DO NOT BELONG

one may speak English this did not help you to belong in a predominantly Xhosa-speaking or Afrikaans school. But aside from the complexities, which many of the young people had been able to negotiate, the very fact that they were told they were different because they spoke a language from outside South Africa affirmed that they did not belong. The memories of arriving in a neighbourhood or school with no ability to understand the language around them was described in such a way that it was clearly a traumatic experience.

Impact of abandonment on identity and sense of belonging

Both groups (16-18 and 18-25) presented visual and spoken narratives about the feelings and the impact of the circumstances that led to them being placed in care, even though they gave little factual information. What emerged from the analysis of the discussions and the artwork was that these experiences were one of the strongest, if not the strongest, reason for their sense of not belonging and their ability to create a positive identity for themselves. This is significant in terms of their future growth, integration and wellbeing.

Shahrokh & Treves (2020) quote work that shows the long-term impact of a fractured past on wellbeing and future functioning as contributing citizens

Where loss occurs, whether familial, cultural, societal or political, there is a loss of identity, and being able to see a “place in the world” (Arendt 1971. p. 296). These fractures can become embedded in young people’s life narratives and this can create multiple and compounding barriers to belonging (Alayarian 2007) ... [this] has implications for their wellbeing and the foundations from which they are building their futures (Correa-Velez et al. 2010; Gonzales et al. 2013). (p. 90)

Some of the 18-25 year old group gave some description of the circumstances leading to their placement in alternative care but these were largely selective about detail. The 16-18 year olds were even more selective about what they shared. They used intentionally vague phrases such as “some kind of issues” to describe why they had been placed in alternative care. What was said (in both groups), however, allowed us to know that their experiences included being left alone (sometimes as young as 8), when a caregiver disappeared, all forms of abuse by caregivers, rejection by parents and deep poverty that meant they could no longer be looked after. Though violence was not spoken about in detail it was clear that some of the circumstances had been violent. Whatever the circumstances all of the young people had been abandoned in a psychological sense. Looking at the literature around the impact of abandonment in the context of healthy child development helps us understand how this experience could lead to a deep feeling of not belonging anywhere.

‘Nurturing care for child development’ (Black et al. 2021), which includes all ages within the life course from infancy to adolescence, is an approach to child development that is now widely accepted as a framework for, among other things, analysing wellbeing and for developing interventions for children and young people. One of the domains within the framework is ‘responsive care’ which is the extent to which children through the life course from infancy to adolescence experience responsive caring, belonging and acceptance. It is very clear that toxic stress, which is often related to the loss or absence of responsive care has an impact on emotional wellbeing as well as physical and cognitive development (Berry & Malek, 2017). This suggests that the experiences the young people had been through would affect their emotional wellbeing and give them a strong reason to feel they do not belong anywhere.

This is reinforced both by the language used to describe their feelings about their experience of abandonment (in whatever form it took) and the art work they made. The language used expressed strong emotion “confused, seeking for help, help me. I am hopeless, I am searching.”, “I was floating, I do not know where do I belong”, “if parents can damage a child, it takes you... you literally live with it for the rest of your life”, “you can see holes here in this heart. So, things

happened to me is like someone taking a knife, stab in the heart, things like that”. Alongside emotional distress the language in these statements describes powerlessness, and a feeling of lack of agency, “things happened to me”, “confused”, “floating”. Having a sense of power over one’s life comes through being able to control, to some extent at least, everyday experiences. It also comes through understanding what is happening and why. The findings show that no one explained; caregivers did not tell them about the past and care workers did not tell them about what it meant to be placed in care. The 18-25 year olds expressed the feeling that this ‘was wrong’ that they should have been told, that their right to know had been violated. This anger as well as the anger described below about the barriers to documentation are signs of a growing sense of power.

In the 18-25 year old group there were examples of lack of connection with friends and family because of their ‘abandonment’. The young man who called himself “a lone wolf”, the young woman who left spaces in her artwork that represented “the blank spaces ... the people who should have been there but were not”. Another example of how deeply their experiences had affected them is the fact that a few said they did not want to know anything about their childhood, they were glad they did not know because they expected the memories to be bad and hurtful. It was clear that their sense of belonging or lack thereof in their early years affected their current sense of belonging.

The 16-18 year olds described eloquently how being abandoned had made them distrustful of people, they no longer trusted anyone. They also described how they wore masks in many different circumstances such as at school, in the children’s home and when among peers. Erikson’s (1968) seminal work on psychosocial development across the lifespan helps us understand how these chosen behaviours reveal the extent of the vulnerability of these young people and the extent to which their past experiences have impacted on their wellbeing. Erikson suggests that each stage of development has a challenge that is to be overcome if healthy adulthood is to be attained. The challenge in adolescence is to move from role confusion to a strong sense of identity – ‘who am I’ and how do I connect to others around me’. In adolescence the ability to move on to the next stage of development needs young people to have a sense of belief in themselves and be able to connect with others. The main challenge of young adulthood is to establish close and committed relationships with others, at work, in friendships and in intimate relationships, for example. The choice to not trust, to wear a mask, to be a “lone wolf” all work against these processes of healthy psychosocial wellbeing. There were some examples in both groups of young people who had created strong friendship bonds or who had strong bonds with siblings which would, in terms of Erikson’s work create some foundation for wellbeing as they moved into adulthood but most had been denied the emotional resources they needed to overcome the challenges of their particular stage of development.

4.1.2 PRESENT

As the figure above shows there are also a set of factors in the present that contribute to the feeling that “I don’t belong anywhere”. These are discussed below.

Lost in care

The 18-25 year old group talked eloquently and with deep feeling about how they had been let down by the system that placed them in care and the subsequent institutional barriers they now faced as they tried to find a way as adults.

Their descriptions of how documentation was dealt with while they were in care show a lack of understanding on the part of many care workers about the legal status and practical support needs of migrant children. Some of the stories described institutions that were aware of the need to work on documentation while children were still young. However, the reality

of institutional and legal barriers related to their particular circumstances as unaccompanied migrant children had often precluded their obtaining documents before they left care.

Understanding this issue is important when looking at how this research can feed into the continuing advocacy by civil society organisations around the particular documentation needs of migrant children taken into government care. The legal advisor for one of the CYCCs made the point that “Documentation options are very limited for unaccompanied and separated foreign children in South Africa” (personal communication, 26, March, 2024).

Sloth-Nielsen & Ackermann’s work on unaccompanied migrant children in the care system in the Western Cape describe young people such as those who participated in their study as “lost in care”.

The expression “lost in care” seems apposite for the majority of [migrant] children identified in CYCCs in the Western Cape Province. 11-18 years is a crucial period, as documentation must be secured for children who remain in South Africa when they reach 18.” (p. 23)

The authors go on to make the point that “Children of refugees are often at high risk of becoming stateless.” (p. 3). The young people’s narratives describe what it means to be “lost in care”. The anger and frustration they express about this situation was palpable in the group discussions (mostly in the 18-25 year old group) as they talked about being “a child of the government” and “the minimum is that my papers are sorted”.

Impact of non-documentation

The long list of the simple activities that are an essential part of adult life that are denied them illustrates the practical barriers they face. The research questions developed for this study include reference to their ability to become “contributing citizens”. The barriers they face are so enormous that this is almost impossible. Both groups describe how they have to seek work in the informal sector which is unpredictable, how they cannot access tertiary education and not even access a driver’s license which would open up employment opportunities. The sense of deep frustration at this situation illustrates their wish to be adults who can contribute, “we want to work”. Many of the 18-25 year old group are involved in volunteer activities related often to the sport they play or the cultural activities they do. One young man described finding his identity in his work with an NGO working with vulnerable youth.

The one area where there is significant difference between the groups is in relation to documentation. The 18-25 year olds are experiencing the impact of not having documents on their ability to build a life. This drives a sense of frustration and anger against the system that has let them down. The 16-18 year olds are less concerned with the issue of documentation because it has not affected their lives yet; they are protected from reality by living in a children’s home. Some of them are aware of the issue but their response is ‘worry’ rather than anger and frustration.

Powerlessness and strength

Powerlessness and strength are balanced between each other in their lives. Their ability to take charge over their lives is illustrated by their stories of changing their anti-social behaviour during pre-adolescence. In spite of this ‘bad’ behaviour their ability to choose to be ‘good’ and find supports such as sports and friends that saw them through their difficulties shows a self-creation of identity and the ability to make a place to belong. Their ability to find and use the resources such as sport and friends for wellbeing shows a sense of innate self-worth and power over their surroundings and selves. A few of the young people had, though, given in to powerlessness and given up, seeing leaving or marrying a South African as the only way out, this creates greater vulnerability.

The discussions in the 18-25 year old group turned to their ability as young people to take

action in their lives. They suggested that they could maybe do something as a group, they asked that we continue meeting to plan some kind of advocacy.

Subsequent to this research the group has met to create a short 'film'. Each of them chose a quote from their story that was captured in the research process and created sound and visual art around the quote. They were assisted in a process of co-creation with the artist and a musician and sound artist. The film has been constructed to tell the story of young people "lost in care" and they have chosen "social workers in children's homes" and Home Affairs officials including the Minister of Home Affairs as the audience for this creative product. SIHMA and Scalabrini Centre Cape Town have undertaken to use the film in their advocacy work and distribute it to other relevant civil society organisations.

Though this process was facilitated by SIHMA the commitment to continue to make their way on a Saturday morning to the research venue which is far from where many of them live shows a commitment and strength that belies their lived experience.

Alongside the innate power described above, though, lies a sense of insecurity and powerlessness so deep that many describe how they do not even "feel human". All of this when they are at a stage of development when they are planning and wanting to create adult identities through activities that will allow progression. The irony is that this powerlessness is created by barriers put in place by the very government that placed them in alternative care.

What remains troubling and needs more research is the fact that the young men appeared to have accessed coping mechanisms more than the young women and that the 16-18 year olds, still in care, talked little about strategies they used to cope.

Some of the young men in the 16-18 year old group came from a bridging programme run by one of the CYCCs. This programme allows the young people to move from a children's home to a semi-independent living situation as they are in the process of finishing school or are looking for work once they are 18. The program included supporting them with small business opportunities, confidence-building and support to process some of their past experiences. It was clear that these young men were better resourced practically and emotionally than the others in the group. Exploring this model further would be an important next step.

5. CONCLUSION

This research set out to understand how migrant youth who have recently left alternative care or are to leave care in the near future understand and experience 'belonging'. It is clear that they do not feel they belong in South Africa, in fact many feel they do not belong anywhere. Past experiences have a significant impact on their sense of belonging and their ability to create a personal identity that will allow them to move into positive adulthood. In spite of this there is evidence that many have inner strength that they draw on to facilitate a positive identity and to give them the power to keep on with hope. Friends and activities such as sport build this inner strength. Social exclusion because they are seen as 'outsiders' who do not belong erodes this inner strength, at times making them feel invisible and at worst not even human.

Alongside social exclusion is institutional exclusion which borders on institutional violence. This exclusion constantly affirms their 'non-human' status as they are denied access to documentation that would allow them to live the productive adult lives they long for. Legal omissions and irregularities have allowed young migrants who have been placed in alternative care to fall between the gaps, to become "lost in care". Institutions that have been given responsibility for their care have let them down by not accessing documents for them as soon as they arrive in care. Even when this duty of care has been applied the non-alignment

of government departments, opaque systems and an openly hostile bureaucracy has made accessing documents almost impossible. The reality of being undocumented results in practical barriers to growth as adults and deep psychological impacts that include emotional stress, anger and frustration. Many of the civil society role players working in the area of migration are aware of the issue of documentation and spend huge effort time and costs from dwindling NGO funding to advocate around the issue. It is hoped that this study, with its emphasis on the perspective of the young people directly affected by the issue will be used to support this work.

There is also some recognition amongst role players of the psychosocial impact of being placed in alternative care and non-documentation. What this study contributes is a rare glimpse into how deep this impact is on young peoples emotional wellbeing. The deep feeling of not belonging, not only in South Africa but anywhere, maybe not even on this planet as a human, has rarely been captured in previous work. The work illustrates the power of an arts-based approach to allow us a glimpse through deeply affecting visual and spoken images into a state of unbelonging and loss of identity. The power of the images also allows a unique insight into the depth of alienation and the deep vulnerability of these young people. This points to the urgent need for an extension of psychosocial support to migrant youth who are in and newly out of alternative care. The need is for support that acknowledges both the impact of the past and the present.

Our hope is that the perspectives of the young people represented here are used to enrich existing advocacy and intervention for a remarkable group of ‘human beings’ who have the longing and the unique skills to make a significant contribution to our society.

6. RECOMMENDATIONS

Government and civil society

- Relevant government stakeholders need to *address the gap in documentation options for children on the move placed in alternative care.*
- Children on the move placed in alternative care are wardens of the State which needs to take full responsibility for these children’s holistic development. The International Convention on the Rights of the Child (of which South Africa is a signatory) states that all children have a right to an identity. Additionally, a child needs an identity and legal status to thrive as they grow into adulthood. The issue can no longer be overlooked. *If a child is declared by the Children’s Court as a child in need of care and protection, this court order should be accompanied by an identity document and temporary immigration status.*
- Civil society organisations need to coordinate *advocacy on documentation pathways for children on the move* to achieve systemic change and greater impact.
- The documentation issues affecting young people are not new but not enough has been achieved to substantially change their pathway options.

Psychosocial support

- Many alternative care institutions do give young people *psychosocial support but this needs to be a key part of care.* This would apply to all children but migrant children have particular contextual differences and these should be taken into account¹⁰.

¹⁰ See e.g. the brief prepared by SCCT "Strengthening youth work practice with and for children on the move in alternative care". https://www.scalabrini.org.za/wp-content/uploads/2023/07/Scalabrini-briefer_Strengthening-youth-work-practice_WEB.pdf

- There is a need for *further research into the nature and quality of psychosocial support services to migrant children in care*, one of the aims of the research would be to look at the applicability of the support to young people's actual emotional needs. The other aim would be to address, as this research shows, the complexity of psychosocial issues that young people experience.

Support after leaving care

Research is needed into existing support programmes for young people who have recently left care as a basis for encouraging NGOs and CBOs to implement such programmes. There are *examples of 'bridging' programmes that support young people*; in South Africa the Children's Act 38 of 2005 requires child and youth care facilities to offer transitional support programmes for youth exiting care. These *need to be identified and documented* in order to develop programme recommendations and guidelines to include the specific nature of support that young migrants need. Note that these bridging programmes exist in other countries in Africa and *best practices can also be identified through comparative studies with other countries* who have developed such programmes.

Research

There is a need for a *long-term ethnographic study* to understand the everyday lives of young migrants who have left care. This research study was limited in the extent to which it helps us understand the actual life conditions of young people, for example, where they live, how they make money to survive, the details of their practical coping strategies. This kind of research would build up the body of knowledge that can be used for advocacy and illustrate the strengths and existing contributions these young people make to society, for example. It would also inform support programming for young people in care and after they leave care.

Listening to young people

This study illustrates the power of listening directly to young people. It also illustrates how this can be successfully done by using research methods that are appealing and appropriate for different ages. Opportunities should be sought to *educate research institutions and NGOs* (international and national) about *listening to young people directly*. This could include *promoting the power-sharing and art-based methodology* used in this research with other researchers.

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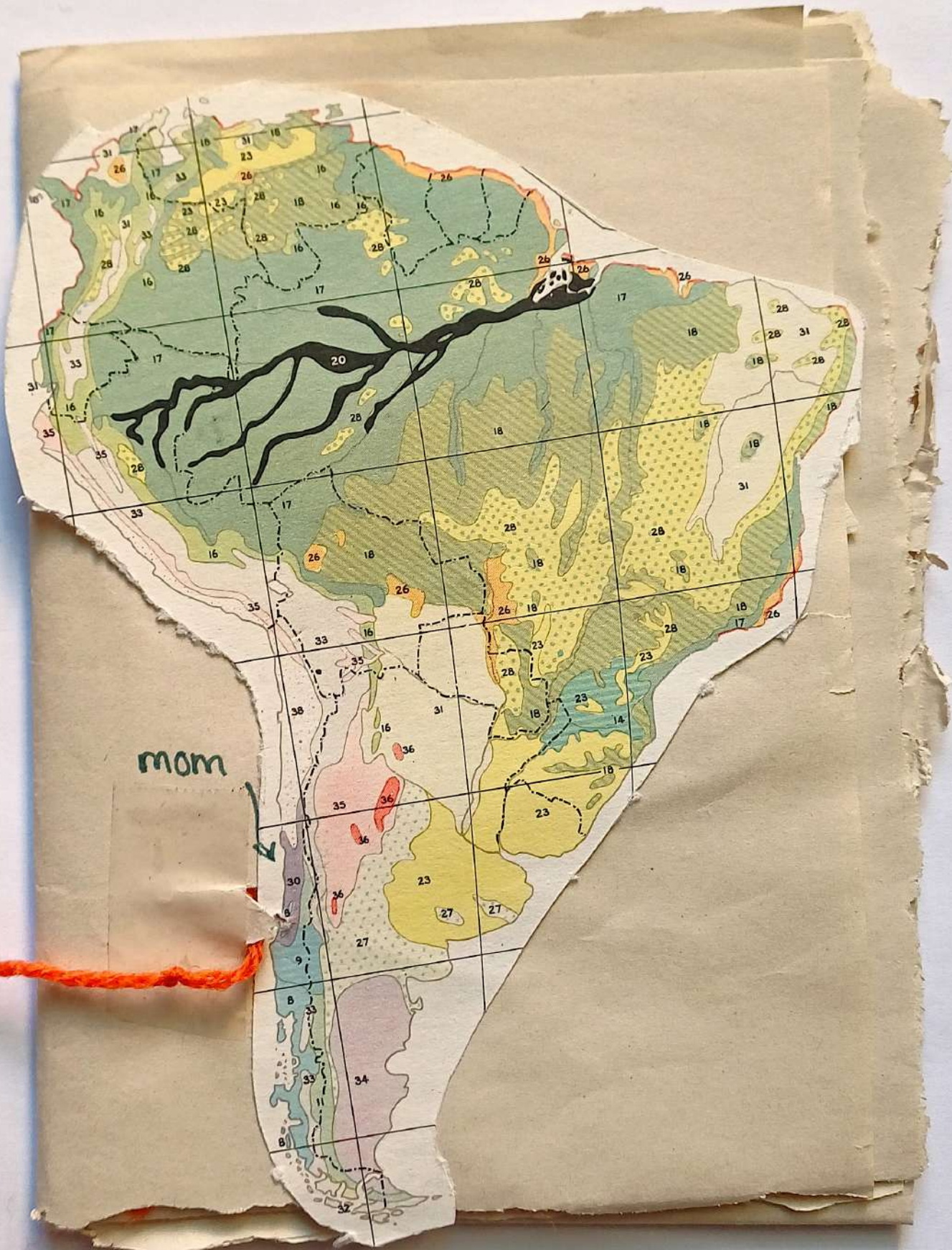
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SCALABRINI, SERVING PEOPLE ON THE MOVE

SCALABRINI INSTITUTE FOR HUMAN MOBILITY IN AFRICA (SIHMA)

SIHMA was established in Cape Town, South Africa, in 2014.

Our **Vision** is an Africa where the human rights of people on the move are ensured and their dignity is promoted. Our **Mission** is to conduct and disseminate research that contributes to the understanding of human mobility and informs policies that ensure the rights and dignity of migrants, asylum seekers and refugees in Africa.

As a bridge between academia and work on the field, we disseminate the findings of our research through our Journal AHMR (African Human Mobility Review), social media and our website www.sihma.org.za, events and trainings.

THE SCALABRINI CENTRE OF CAPE TOWN (SCCT)

The **Scalabrini Centre of Cape Town** is a South African non-profit organisation whose mission is to welcome, to protect, to promote and to integrate people on the move into local society. The SCCT has been working with people on the move for more than 20 years providing legal assistance, livelihood services and psychosocial interventions through a holistic lens. Its vision is a welcoming South Africa where the rights of people on the move are realised.

www.scalabrini.org.za

LAWRENCE HOUSE

Lawrence House is a **child and youth care centre** registered with the Department of Social Development. It is the only specialised residential facility in South Africa dedicated to the care and protection of unaccompanied migrant and separated refugee children. Lawrence House advocates for the rights realisation of these children, especially for viable documentation pathways and promotes a trauma informed care methodology to address the particular trauma linked to displacement and loss.

NETWORK OF SCALABRINI STUDY CENTRES



CEMLA, Buenos Aires

Centro de Estudios Migratorios Latinoamericanos, established in 1985 in Buenos Aires (Argentina)
www.cemla.com

CEM, Sao Paulo

Centro de Estudios Migratorios, established in 1985 in Sao Paulo (Brazil)
www.missaonspaz.org

CSER, Rome

Centro Studi Emigrazione Roma, established in 1964 in Rome (Italy)
www.cser.it

CMS, New York

Center for Migration Studies of New York, established in 1969 in New York (USA)
www.cmsny.org

CIEMI, Paris

Centre d'Information et d'Études sur les Migrations Internationales, established in 1971 in Paris (France)
www.ciemi.org

SMC, Manila

Scalabrini Migration Center, established in 1987 in Manila (Philippines)
www.smc.org.ph



**SCALABRINI
MIGRATION
STUDY
CENTERS**

The Federation of Scalabrini Centers for Migration Studies unites seven centres across the world, each devoted to research and advocacy on migration. Located in New York, Paris, Rome, Basel, São Paulo, Buenos Aires, and Manila, these centres monitor the development of international migration. All of them are organized with similar departments, including a program dedicated to research, another dedicated to specialized publications—including periodicals, monographs and academic papers—as well as programmes dedicated to documentation, conferences, and other educational activities.



SIMN
Scalabrini International
Migration Network

The Scalabrini International Migration Network (SIMN) is an umbrella organization established in 2007 by the Congregation of the Missionaries of Saint Charles, Scalabrinians. SIMN encompasses more than 250 grassroots Scalabrini entities that serve and advocate for the dignity and rights of migrants, refugees, internally displaced people, and seafarers around the world. SIMN fulfils its mission through an extensive network of think tanks, social service centres, shelters, senior centres, orphanages, medical clinics, kindergartens, schools, employment centres, and cultural centres. SIMN works closely with other entities at the local, national, and international levels, promoting comprehensive service programs and advocating for the dignity and rights of migrants and their families.



PEOPLE BEHIND THE FIGURES