



# Contextualised Responsiveness:

CARE-LEAVERS' RESPONSES TO RISKS  
AND OPPORTUNITIES IN A RESOURCE-  
CONSTRAINED SOCIAL ENVIRONMENT.

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# Agenda



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# Background to the study

► Care-leaving Research informs us of the following:

Transition from structured care to independence is overwhelming

- Limited family support
- Low educational achievement
- Weak life and social skills
- Low emotional and behavioral maturity
- Struggles with coping and adjustment.

Theory- important to understanding how things work??

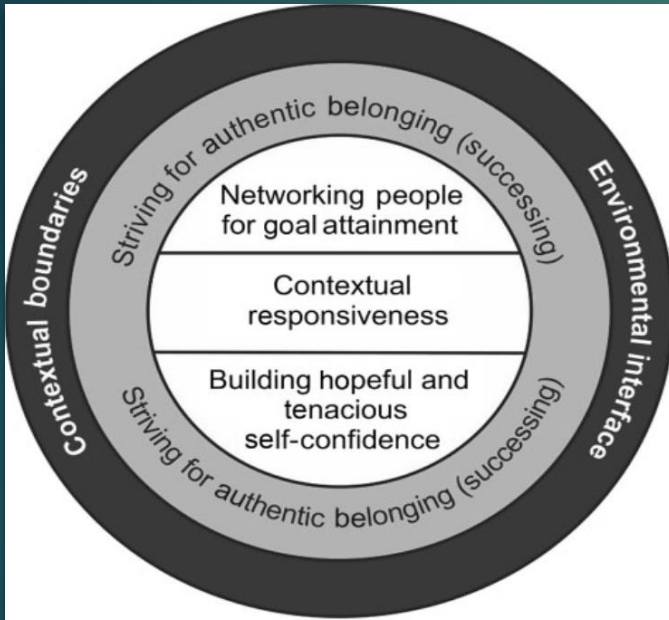
- Global North and South- limited generation of theory related to care-leaving



# Van Breda's (2015) “care-leaving theory”

▶ Van Breda et al. (2012) found in a SA study, that male care-leavers navigate challenging social environments through four processes.

- ▶ Striving for authentic belonging, where they invest significant effort in building genuine, fulfilling relationships.
- ▶ Networking for goal attainment – building supportive networks of family, friends, and even strangers to achieve goals.
- ▶ Contextualized responsiveness – assessing social opportunities and threats, then responding constructively.
- ▶ Hopeful, tenacious self-confidence – demonstrating resilience by trusting in their ability to overcome challenges.



# Background...cont...

- ▶ Became known as the “Care-leaving theory”
- ▶ Later research (Hlungwani & Van Breda, 2020) showed these processes function similarly for women, reinforcing that resilience processes are **inclusive of all genders**.
- ▶ While described as a *nascent* theory needing further study.
- ▶ Focussed on one aspect of my study examined the contextual responsiveness in Van Breda’s care-leaving theory, highlighting care-leavers’ ability to analyse social contexts, identify opportunities, and protect against threats.



# What is contextualised responsiveness?



- ▶ South Africa is a significantly under-resourced country. What do I mean by this:




# Challenges for Care-Leavers and the Need for Responsive Skills

- ▶ Care-leavers often return to the same risk-laden communities they were removed from, limit post-care opportunities



- ▶ Transitions are often compressed/accelerated with limited post-care supports



- ▶ Given the above care-leavers need to learn responsive skills to read and act in this context, which is foundational to resilience. 



- ▶ CR – is a psychosocial process: reading the social environment and responding constructively



- ▶ High unemployment rates, crime, limited opportunities for education, and housing, despite more than 30 years of non-racial democracy.



# Continued...CR

Combines appraisal ('stop-think') with purposeful action and review

Enables young people to identify threats/opportunities and pursue goals

Aim was to assess young people's ability to identify and protect themselves against possible threats and to take advantage of opportunities in response to their social environments ('contextual responsiveness' in the care-leaving theory).

It focussed on care-leavers' ability to think, react and respond to the contextual factors that shape their thoughts, emotions and behaviours in responding to the risks and opportunities in their environment.

# Theoretical framework:

## Protection Motivation Theory (Rogers, 1975)

Motivation for self-protection arises from two appraisals:

- ▶ **Threat appraisal** – evaluating severity, vulnerability, and likelihood of a threat.
- ▶ **Coping appraisal** – assessing response efficacy (effectiveness of action), self-efficacy (confidence in ability), and barriers.
- ▶ Motivation to protect activates when risk is seen as *real AND manageable*



# Cont....

## □ Archer's internal conversations & reflexivity (2003):

- ▶ People engage in internal conversations (self-dialogues). They refine thoughts, consider alternatives, and weigh emotions.
- ▶ Meaning-making is intrapersonal, relational and cultural
- ▶ Process continues until resolution or abandonment
- ▶ Relevance to care-leavers decisions shaped by situational context



## □ Theory of Reasoned Action (TRA) [Fishbein and Ajzen, (2010)]

- ▶ Behaviour → shaped by **Intentions**. Intentions → shapes our attitudes + subjective norms. Explains why intentions may not translate into action.
- ▶ Relevance to care-leavers: Care-leavers face obstacles beyond intent – support must boost real control



# METHODOLOGY

Qualitative, grounded theory (Charmaz, 2014 )

Setting: Girls and Boys Town SA; part of longitudinal 'Growth Beyond the Town'

Nonprobability volunteer sample, including those who were willing and available in the 2019 wave of interviews.

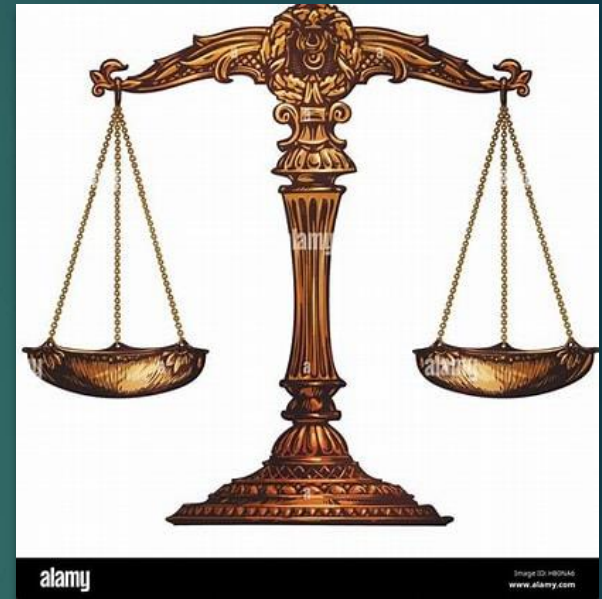
Participants: 31 care-leavers (12F, 19M), ages 17–26, 1–7 years post-care

Data: semi-structured 60–90 min interviews; recorded and transcribed.

Data was collected by fieldworkers in 3 Provinces in 2019, they were trained

# Ethical considerations

- ▶ Informed consent obtained from all participants.
- ▶ Covered confidentiality, anonymity, and voluntary participation. Youth participant (17 years old)- Signed youth assent form
- ▶ Parental consent form also completed
- ▶ Counselling support: Free counselling offered through local organizations. Participants informed how to access sessions. No requests for counselling were made.
- ▶ Ethics approval: Granted by University of Johannesburg Faculty of Humanities Research Ethics Committee. Approval date: 20 September 2012



# Data trustworthiness

## Credibility (Lincoln & Guba, 1985):

- ▶ All transcripts thoroughly read to ensure familiarity with the data
- ▶ Careful examination of every analysis and coding step
- ▶ **Confirmability:**
  - ▶ Transparent **audit trail** maintained from data collection → transcription → conclusions
  - ▶ Supervisor evaluated concepts and themes with me
  - ▶ Common quotes organized under coded transcript examples
  - ▶ Supervisor added another level of analysis, strengthening accuracy
  - ▶ I rigorously checked all analysis and coding

# Findings: Three themes emerged

- ▶ Cognitive appraisal of the social environment (learning, observation)
- ▶ Reflective learning from past experiences (owning mistakes; mindset shift)
- ▶ Navigating risks (self-control; deliberate avoidance; safety choices)



# Theme 1 – Cognitive appraisal of the social environment

Developing a “keen eye”: Care-leavers learned to observe surroundings carefully, using a “stop–think–act–review” process (Petersen, 1995) - micro-process in daily choices



Observation was seen as a form of protection: Acute awareness of social cues, body language, and dynamics helped them identify both threats (toxic friendships, drug use, harmful influences) and opportunities.



Used networks for exposure and opportunity (e.g. family, friendships, neighbour networks )

## Cognitive Appraisal of the Social Environment



*Care-leavers learn to observe, evaluate risks, make choices, and adjust in their social contexts.*

# Theme 1 – Cognitive appraisal of the social environment

▶ Examples:

▶ Nyaleti avoided unhealthy friendships that conflicted with his life goals.

*“Like, when you are with your friends, and you start to notice that they are not good, healthy friends. So, you must pull away from them. They are stealing and stuff like that . . . People do stupid things like create chaos or start trouble and things like that, so I do not like those things. Choose friends that have a vision of what they are doing and where they are going”. (Nyaleti, M-22-4Y)*

▶ Kabelo identified peers engaging in damaging behaviours (e.g., drugs) and chose to distance himself.

*“I have identified those people that are taking drugs, and that is where, as a person, I must think. You must not want to choose that option, and if you do, you must live with it. I think most of my friends now, even when you see them, are very sad because they are already taking drugs. They do not realise that it is damaging them; but as for me, when I look at these threats, I identify them, and I stay calm. I do not judge them. That is one thing that I do; I don't judge them. First, I will try to influence the person to stop taking drugs, and if they choose to take drugs, then I must know that this is not my friend. Because if they carry on taking drugs, that means that they are not my friend”. (Kabelo, M-26-6Y)*

# CONTINUED...



- ▶ Dale instinctively ignored harmful people, protecting his well-being.

*“I do not even have to push them away. Just, if they are in my vicinity, it is just like I can ignore them, and even then, it is almost like a subconscious thing. I can pretend to acknowledge them, but ignore them at the same time. (Dale, M-25-6Y)*

- ▶ Nokuthula scanned her environment to spot untrustworthy individuals.
- ▶ Karabo, a participant developed the ability to see through social situations – to understand the behaviour of others – and to respond to his environment. He loved being in the limelight and the exposure to his surroundings and knows where to be to get this. It is about working his way up.

*“I get a lot of exposure. When she [foster mother] does her school talks I am always there. It is fun being there. I want to work my way and then go on to my next chapter. (Karabo, M-23-5Y)*

# Cont...

- ▶ There was a sense of being 'street smart' – that is, being aware of their surroundings and quickly evaluating social events to assess potential threats or benefits. Karabo was aware of the benefits of his foster mother's contacts. However, this street smartness also meant that they had to be alert, aware and able to observe and identify risks too.

Kaleb, summed up the “street smartness that developed over time”

*“Especially not feeling safe. You never know what will happen – you face peer pressure; you face danger, robbery, socializing with people that you don't know . . . I have been robbed at gunpoint, but I wasn't scared at the time it happened because it came as a shock. But the aftermath was when I got scared, and I was like, okay, this happened to me. In a way, my strength is just being streetwise”. (Kaleb, M-23-5Y)*

*“Being streetwise just gives you that perspective that I have seen situations like this; I have experienced a situation like this, so next time it happens, you know what to do. You know where to be, you know where to stop, and you know where to look. It doesn't give me that angle of me looking over my shoulder all the time because it happened”. (Phila-M-20-2Y)*

# Cont

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- ▶ Exposure to incidents in their social environments allowed for a heightened awareness, review of actions and the capacity to navigate effectively through their environment.
- ▶ Outcome: This reflexive appraisal enabled participants to make better decisions,. This 'sussing out' and observation of the social environment also meant the following:
  - a heightened awareness of the environment.
  - learned and adapted
  - developed basic protective skills
  - were able to safeguard their physical, social well-being
  - were able to review of actions and the capacity to navigate effectively
  - align social choices with their personal vision and goals.

# Theme 2 – Reflexive learning from past mistakes

- ▶ Participants emphasized that their ability to “suss out” and observe their environments came from reflecting on **past mistakes** and their consequences.
- ▶ Sometimes these experiences led to important realizations and life lessons.
- ▶ **Critical self-examination:** Care-leavers engaged in reflexive learning—accepting responsibility, acknowledging failures, and committing to avoid repeating them.
- ▶ **Observation of others:** Lessons were drawn not only from their own mistakes but also by watching the actions of peers, noting both positive and negative behaviours, and applying these insights to their own lives.



## ▶ Examples:

- ▶ Ravit paused to evaluate choices before acting, asking whether they would benefit him.

*“Since I have left Boys Town now, I do not do [certain] things [I did before] and I think about what I am doing and why I am doing it. What is it going to do for me? Like anything in my life, that is going to happen. Before it happens, now I take time to think about it: if I know that it is going to better me”. (Ravit, M-19-3Y)*

- ▶ Nhlanhla and Jenny acknowledged past risky behaviours and shifted toward responsibility and trust.

*“I have learned that life is hard and the things that I have been going through; I have learned a lot, like how to focus on one thing and not make the same mistakes that I was making in the past. . . I was smoking before, but not drugs and all that”. (Nhlanhla, F-21-2Y)*

- ▶ Kaleb reflected on regrets and life’s pace, using these insights to reframe his decisions.

*“My past has affected me in seeing life differently, but it made me sad at times, because you always think about the past and how things would have been if things were different. It is sort of like life has moved on so quickly and you wonder what would have happened if things were different at that time. You always have regrets and stuff that happened, and there you were at that time”. (Kaleb, M-23-5Y)*

- ▶ Nokuthula distanced herself from harmful influences, refusing to repeat past risks.

# Theme 2....continued

- ▶ *Natalie realized the enduring value of family support over peer pressure.*

*“Before, I always chose friends over my family. I always thought my family was wrong until I realised, until I grew up, that your family will stand by you no matter what; so that is what they helped me with”. (Natalie, F-20-3Y)*

- ▶ *Tessa chose healthier friendships, rejecting smoking and drinking.*
- ▶ *Nkosi exercised financial self-control, prioritizing essentials over his vices.*
- ▶ *Xolani focused on making decisions that would positively benefit his future.*

*“How I would solve future problems is that I would probably. . . I will make better decisions. I will think about everything, and whichever decision I make, I will try to think of it along the lines of: ‘Would it benefit me?’ (Xolani, M-24-5Y)*

- ▶ **Outcome:** Reflexive learning fostered **self-awareness, self-discipline, and goal-directed choices**. It strengthened participants’ ability to protect themselves, prioritize well-being, and cultivate a positive mindset.
- ▶ Owned past mistakes; shifted priorities (e.g., finances, friends)
- ▶ Adopted ‘will this benefit me?’ test before acting
- ▶ Reset identity away from labels; chose healthier networks

# Theme 3 – Navigating risks

- ▶ **✿ Navigating Risks through Self-Control**
- ▶ **Risks are inevitable:** Care-leavers recognized they were not immune to risks in their environments.
- ▶ **Their key response:** What mattered was *how care-leavers responded*—through deliberate self-control and discipline.
- ▶ **Process:**
  - ▶ **Observation & insight** – reading the environment carefully.
  - ▶ **Decision-making** – weighing options before acting.
  - ▶ **Self-control** – managing impulses, emotions, and behaviours.
  - ▶ **Action** – choosing safer, goal-aligned behaviours.
- ▶ **Outcome:** This enabled participants to resist temptations, avoid harmful situations, and maintain healthier well-being despite living in risk-laden contexts.





▶ **✿ Exercising Discipline**

- ▶ **Deliberate decision-making:** Participants consciously chose how to manage their behaviour, emotions, and impulses.
- ▶ **Goal orientation:** Their focus was on accomplishing long-term goals, even when faced with temptations or distractions.
- ▶ **Persistent effort:** This required endurance, consistent work, and the ability to prioritize future benefits over immediate satisfaction.
- ▶ **Protective mechanism:** By exercising discipline, they strengthened resilience and protected their well-being in risk-laden environments.

# Cont...



- ▶ Examples of how participants navigated the risks:
- ▶ Nokuthula avoided risky peers by physically distancing herself.  
*“I walk faster, and I avoid them and tell them I don’t want to talk to them. I just go in a crowd. (Nokuthula, F-20,1Y)*
- ▶ Nhlanhla stayed indoors, focusing on her child and trusted friend.  
*“By just sitting at home. Just lock myself in the home, watching TV and my child. Eat our snacks. I am always indoors, and I do not know about certain things. And like I am saying, [Zia] is my only friend. (Nhlanhla, F-21-2Y)*
- ▶ Thabiso resisted provocation, walking away from fights.

# Cont..theme 3

- ▶ Dembro calmed himself by seeking support from a friend instead of retaliating.

*"I do have those days where I argue with other people. I get to a point where I want to inflict damage on someone else. So now, I walk away, or I just go to Alia [a friend], and I talk to him". (Dembro, M-22-3Y)*

- ▶ Xolani managed stress after betrayal, preventing destructive actions.
- ▶ Ravit chose not to attend a club, avoiding potential gang-related problems.
- ▶ Letty confessed to stealing money, showing honesty and relief through self-control.

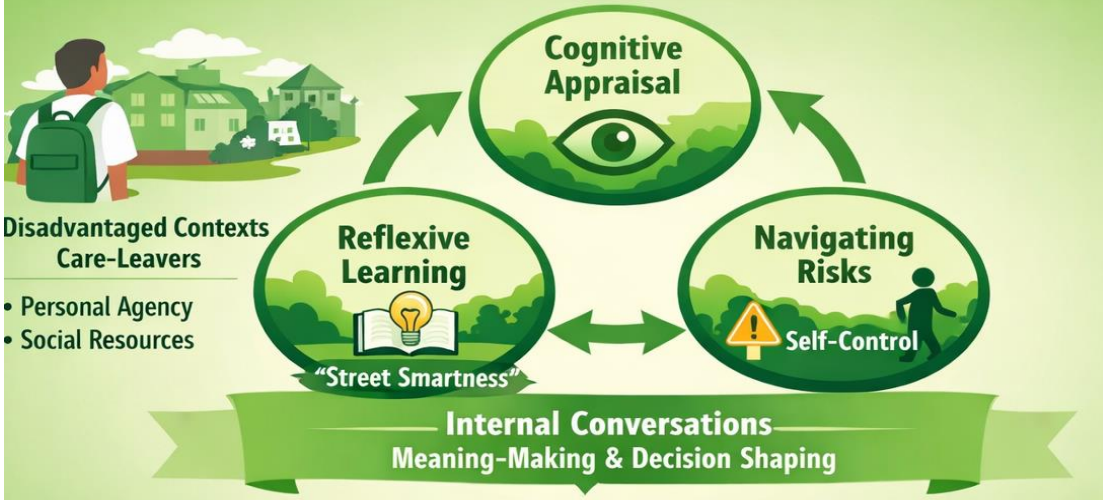
*"I think it was a few weeks ago when I took my dad's money. I forgot how much it was, and then they asked me about it, and I said I never took it. And then in the morning, I took the money out and went to go and give it to him, and I told him that I had taken it, and I said that I was sorry. So, I lied, but then I told the truth after that. Wrong in a way, because he does do a lot for me and stuff, and then I felt a bit relieved after I gave the money back, because I felt like I did something good . . . The guilt wasn't there any more . . . Lies are not going to get you anywhere. Stealing things is also not going to get you anywhere. It will just bring you down" . (Letty, F-19-2Y)*

# Theme 3....continued

- ▶ Outcome: Balanced decision-making: Participants assessed situations, gathered information, evaluated options, and acted thoughtfully rather than impulsively. Exercising discipline and restraint allowed them to resist temptations, cope with challenges, and maintain healthier well-being.
- ▶ Chose avoidance/exit strategies (walk away; stay in; stick with safe peer)
- ▶ Practiced self-control under provocation; de-escalation and delay
- ▶ Made pre-commitment choices (skip clubs; cutting down on alcohol; and changing plans)



# Contextualized Responsiveness and Resilience



## Turning Points



security • Stability • Self-Actualization

## Resilience Theory



- Acceptance of Challenges
- Dynamic Process

## Youth-Environment



Interactional Ou

Resilience in care-leaving: Observing, reflecting, and responding to thrive in adve

# Discussion

# Discussion..cont...

- ▶ Structural disadvantage: Youth ageing out of care often return to risk-laden, disadvantaged communities.
- ▶ **Active life construction:** Participants were not passive subjects of social structures; they actively shaped their own lives – developed personal agency.
- ▶ They made adjustment despite fear: Even though care-leavers experienced fear, anxiety, and uncertainty, they found ways to adapt, such as reassuring family members of improved behaviour. By staying alert and being aware, participants monitored both positive and negative interactions in their environment. Learning through experience: These observations and reflections occasionally led to important realizations and lessons, strengthening their resilience and adaptability.
- ▶ **Reflexive Learning and Turning Points:** Participants demonstrated reflexive learning by reflecting on incidents and adjusting their actions. They made goal-directed choices and informed decisions to better navigate their environments.
- ▶ **Turning points:** These moments of change marked significant shifts in their life trajectories, strengthening resilience and shaping pathways into adulthood.

# Cont...

Foundational to resilience theory, in response to adversity, care-leavers developed coping mechanisms and strategies that are meant to help them to get through it.



**Interactional perspective (Van Breda, 2023):** Resilience is not only internal or external, but emerges in the *interaction* between young people and their social environments. Thus, Resilience is forged in the interaction between youth and their environments.



Despite risks, participants managed to stay relatively safe, transforming challenges into opportunities for growth and resilience. This adaptation did not mean avoiding fear, but by actively engaging, observing, and learning from their environments.



Participants also leveraged on social resources (relationships, opportunities, finances).

# Practice implications

- ▶ **Core skill for care-leavers:** Contextualized responsiveness—*stop, think, act, review*—helps youth assess and respond to risks in their social environments.
- ▶ **Practitioner strategies:**
  - ▶ □ *Situational analysis training:* Teach observational and contextual skills to interpret cues and changes.
  - ▶ ↻ *Reflective practice:* Encourage periodic evaluation of actions and encounters to foster growth.
  - ▶ □ *Managed Opportunities for Independence* (Hlungwani & Van Breda, 2022): Expose youth to limited, supported risk experiences with post-event reflection. This will ensure some exposure to real-world risk
- ▶ **Exit planning:** Embed contextualized responsiveness into transitional plans (IDP) to prepare youth for dynamic, complex environments.
- **Internal conversations as a tool:** Use Archer's (2003) concept to help youth imagine futures, clarify goals, and process uncertainty. These conversations involve creativity, reliving past experiences, and clarification of ideas.
- By fostering reflection and imagination, internal conversations strengthen resilience and support future-oriented decision-making.


# Practical tools

- ▶ **Interactional tools:** Skills must be taught as flexible, context-sensitive tools for engaging with the social world.
- ▶ **CYCC implications:** Address “feelings of the unknown” by gradually exposing youth to real-world environments and supporting their meaning-making.
- ▶ Teach a 60-second scan: people, place, purpose, exit plan
- ▶ Use cue cards: red flags (peers, substances, late-night hotspots); green flags (safe adults, opportunities)
- ▶ Map out ‘risky routes’ vs ‘safe routes’ to school/work; role-play refusals. Schedule weekly reflection micro-sessions; track actions not just feelings.
- ▶ Connect to livelihoods: map opportunity networks (mentors, part time employment and training)
- ▶ Embed ‘review’ moments after incidents (what went well/what to change)
- ▶ Use a weekly ‘S.T.A.R.’ sheet: Situation – Task – Action – Result – Review




# Policy (South Africa)

Aligns with the Childrens Act, i.e  
the focus on preparation and  
aftercare



Bridges implementation gaps  
by coaching situational skills,  
not just plans



Supports interactional  
resilience: youth × people ×  
environments

# Key takeaways & discussion

- ▶ Contextualised responsiveness is learnable and coachable
- ▶ Three themes: better appraisal, reflective learning, planned risk navigation
- ▶ Beyond appraisal: Responsiveness involves not only cognitive appraisal but also the behavioural response that follows.
- ▶ Integrated process: Cognitive and behavioural elements operate together as one social process (Van Breda, 2015).
- ▶ A “stop, think, act, and review” cycle, rooted in observing and learning from others in the social environment.
- ▶ Participants recognised when behaviours were unhealthy (e.g., toxic friendships, unlawful activities). When life goals became clearer, participants ended behaviours or relationships that no longer aligned with their vision.

## Conclusion

Care-leavers adapt not by avoiding fear, but by actively engaging, observing, and learning from their environments.

Responsiveness is not just avoiding risks—it is preparing young people for those risks.

Turning points emerge when reflection leads to deliberate, goal-directed action.

Discipline means choosing long-term growth over short-term gratification.

Resilience lives in the interaction—between youth, people, and their environments.

Resilience is not avoiding risks, but learning, reviewing and mastering self-control in the face of them.

# References

- ▶ Reuben, S. (2024/2025). Contextualised responsiveness. *International Journal of Adolescence and Youth*.

Let's remember risks don't disappear – but our ability to read the context, respond with intention, and reflect with purpose is what transforms vulnerability into resilience.

**Thank you!**

**QUESTIONS?**



What will you adopt in your practice after hearing the above to prepare young people for their social environment?

