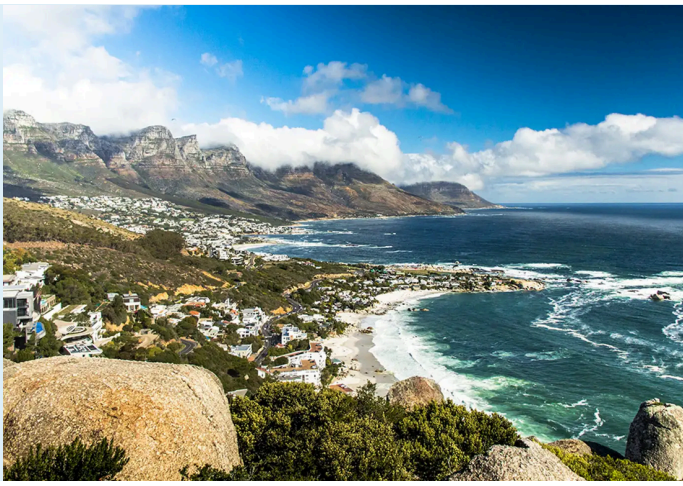
LAIDLAW SCHOLARS

LiA: Impact Report



Alexia Kirwan-Jones, Durham University

Table of Contents

Introduction

This report outlines the impact of my six-week placement undertaken at a Child and Youth Care Centre (CYCC) in Cape Town, South Africa. The CYCC houses children and adolescents who have experienced significant adversity, including abuse, neglect, abandonment, and high-risk home environments. Many of the young people in the centre present with complex emotional needs, limited access to mental health support, and minimal opportunities for enrichment or structured psychosocial learning.

This project aligned with two United Nations Sustainable Development Goals (SDGs): **SDG 3 - Good health and wellbeing**, through the delivery of mental health and psychoeducation workshops and 1:1 talking spaces, and **SDG 16 - Peace, justice, and strong institutions**, through the safeguarding reporting that led to organisational accountability and structural change. These SDGs provide a useful framework for understanding both the planned and emergent impact of this LiA.

This project had **two distinct streams of impact:**

1. A planned mental health and wellbeing programme, designed and delivered for girls aged 11-16 yrs, focusing on emotion regulation, identity, self-esteem, social media and appearance pressures, and empowerment. This programme included both workshops and 1:1 peer support sessions.

2. An emergent safeguarding impact, arising from multiple disclosures of abuse and neglect made by children during the placement. These disclosures required formal reporting to both the organisation's head office and the Department of Social Development. The resulting investigations led to the removal of unsafe staff members and significant organisational change.

While the initial aim of the placement centred on delivering mental health support and empowerment workshops, the safeguarding disclosures became a major and unanticipated component of the project's overall impact. Our time on-site at the CYCC was cut short due to personal safety concerns following the dismissal of implicated staff members, however, despite this premature ending, the project still produced meaningful psychosocial, educational, and structural outcomes.

This report details the planned programme, its SMART goals, the activities delivered, the observed impact on the children, alongside the safeguarding outcomes that emerged. It concludes with reflections on how the project aligned with the 3C's Leadership Model to create impactful change and ethical leadership.

Planned programme: Mental health & wellbeing for teen girls

1. SMART goals

Though the nature of psychosocial work does not lend itself to rigid, quantifiable targets in the way that SMART goals are typically used, the SMART goals framework remains a useful tool for identifying the impact of this project even when using a more qualitative and observational approach.

a. Specific

This programme aimed to:

- Provide a safe, consistent adult presence for girls aged 11-16
- Deliver three structured psychoeducation and wellbeing workshops per week
- Cover topics such as identity, self-esteem, negative self-talk, emotion regulation, appearance pressures, social media navigation and comparison
- Offer 1:1 listening support sessions for any child requesting a private space to talk
- Create opportunities for children to express feelings, ask questions, think critically, and develop emotional literacy

b. Measurable (qualitative indicators)

Impact was measured through:

- Engagement levels in workshops (participation, discussion, willingness to share)
- Completion of a topic checklist indicating interest in all proposed areas
- Observable behavioural evidence of learning (e.g. children challenging filter use on social media)
- Growth in demand for 1:1 sessions (from one child in week 1 to multiple children by weeks 2 & 3)
- The nature and depth of issues raised by children in 1:1 sessions
- Children's repeated requests for 1:1 sessions, indicating trust and perceived usefulness

c. Achievable

Aims were realistic within the six-week time frame. Workshops were delivered consistently until the placement ended early. 1:1 sessions were offered responsively based on demand. The programme remained within ethical boundaries, providing emotional support and psychoeducation without crossing into therapy.

d. Relevant

This programme directly addressed:

- An absence of psychological and emotional support services at the CYCC
- High levels of emotional distress among children
- The need for safe adults who listen without judgement
- The lack of enrichment activities and opportunities for psychosocial learning
- The centre's broader need for trauma-informed care

e. Time-bound

This programme was delivered over the first 3-4 weeks of the LiA, with engagement increasing significantly during weeks two and three. The programme ended prematurely due to safeguarding escalation. Recommendations for long-term support were presented to the organisation's head office before departure.

2. Activities delivered

a. Workshops

Three workshops per week were delivered to girls aged 11-16. Topics included:

- Identity and self-esteem

- Challenging negative self-talk and cognitive reframing
- Understanding emotions
- Emotion regulation strategies
- Appearance pressures
- Navigating social media
- Social comparison and its psychological effects

Planned but undelivered topics (due to early termination) included:

- Female reproductive and sexual health
- Body image
- Communication skills and asking for help
- Healthy lifestyle
- Supporting friends/active listening skills
- Boundary setting

At the start of the programme, the girls completed a checklist indicating which topics they wished to explore. All of the girls selected nearly every topic, highlighting a significant unmet need for mental health and wellbeing education, and emotional support.

Engagement Patterns

Engagement increased steadily over the sessions. Early workshops involved more reserved participation, but by week two, the girls were actively contributing, sharing personal experiences, and engaging in critical discussions, particularly around social media, appearance pressures, comparison and self-worth.

b. One-to-one Sessions

1:1 sessions were offered to any child requesting additional support or just wanting a private space to talk. Initially, only one child attended, but by weeks two and three, demand increased significantly with multiple children seeking sessions to discuss a variety of topics. Examples of topics brought up included typical teenage relationship dilemmas, fallings out with other children, missing parents, difficulties managing intense anger and sadness, feelings of loneliness, suicidal ideation and self-harm, and frustrations around living in the CYCC.

Discussions focused on active listening, emotional validation, gentle questioning, and providing a safe, friendly, and non-judgmental space whilst adhering to safeguarding and confidentiality procedures.

3. Impact of the Mental Health and Wellbeing Programme

The mental health and wellbeing programme – focused on empowerment, psychoeducation, and emotional support – directly contributes to SDG 3 – Good Health and Wellbeing. The CYCC had no existing mental health provision, and the workshops and 1:1 sessions addressed a critical gap in psychosocial support.

Increased engagement and trust

The most immediate impact was the growth in engagement. As the girls became more comfortable, they participated more actively, asked questions, and shared personal reflections. Their willingness to attend 1:1 sessions demonstrated increasing trust and a recognition that the space was safe and supportive.

Behavioural evidence of learning

Several moments illustrated the programme's impact:

- After discussing appearance pressures and social media filters, one girl told another, "We literally just talked about this, girl you don't need no filter, you're beautiful just the way God made you" as the second girl went to take a photo of herself using a Snapchat filter.
- Another girl made a point of telling a fellow volunteer that she had filmed a video *without* a filter, explicitly linking this choice to the workshop content.
- During activities requiring critique of social comparison and being cautious of how we perceive things we see online, several girls spoke passionately and insightfully about their opinions on the matter and the pressures they face.
- During the session on managing difficult emotions, many of the girls were eager to share personal experiences before we discussed specific emotion regulation strategies. Their engagement demonstrated a clear interest in developing healthier coping tools.
- In a reflective letter-writing activity addressed to their future selves, several children showed meaningful insight into the importance of self-compassion and the coping strategies discussed. The content in many of their letters indicated that the messages from the workshop had been internalised.
- One girl with whom I had frequent 1:1 sessions regarding difficulties managing intense anger approached me to describe an an incident that day in which she successfully remained calm and resisted acting on impulsive urges. Her decision to seek me out to share this moment, and the visible pride she expressed when reflecting on it, suggested that having a consistent, supportive space to talk had contributed to her beginning to develop healthier emotion regulation skills and a sense of personal achievement.

These moments indicate internalisation of key messages, the beginning of cognitive shifts around self-worth and appearance, and the value of having a safe, supportive adult as an emotional outlet.

Emotional literacy and expression

The workshops and 1:1 sessions provided rare opportunities for emotional expression, with many children articulating feelings they do not often get to share with safe adults. They demonstrated abilities to name emotions, identify triggers, reflect on their experiences, articulate their opinions, and demonstrated understanding of the psychological concepts taught.

Safe space for disclosure

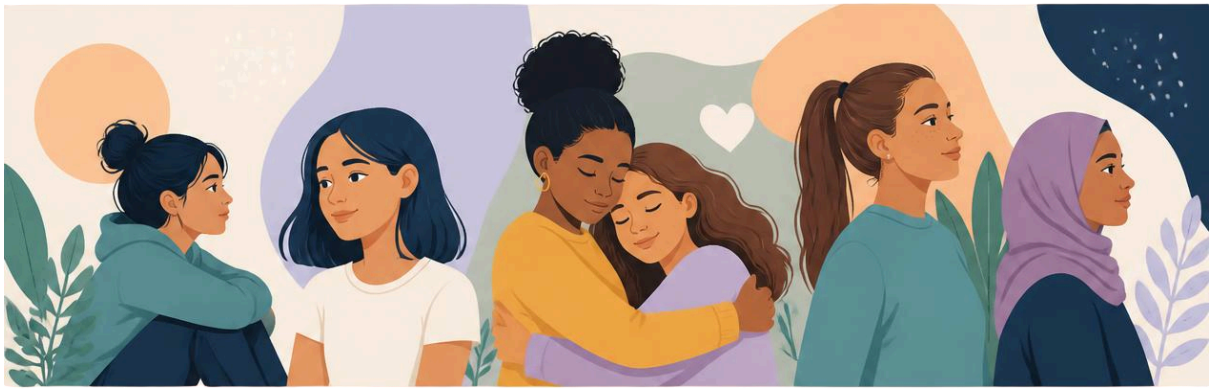
The 1:1 sessions became a vital outlet for children who lacked any other supportive adult relationships. The range of issues – from everyday teenage dilemmas to suicidal ideation – underscores the depth of unmet emotional needs within the CYCC.

Organisational recommendations

Before departure, a presentation was delivered to the organisation's head office outlining:

- Immediate steps: establishing "office hours" where children can speak to staff or volunteers
- Medium-term steps: implementing regular group sessions
- Long-term steps: partnering with external organisations to provide free counselling and psychoeducation workshops

These recommendations, should they be taken on board, would provide a foundation for sustainable mental health support at the CYCC.



Safeguarding Impact: Emergent Outcomes

The safeguarding disclosures and subsequent organisational response aligned strongly with SDG 16: Peace, justice and strong institutions, particularly the targets relating to protecting children from violence, ensuring responsive and accountable institutions, and strengthening safeguarding systems.

Nature of disclosures

As trust developed, multiple children disclosed experiences of:

- Physical abuse
- Emotional/psychological abuse
- Neglect
- Unsafe staff behaviour
- Other safeguarding concerns

These disclosures were unanticipated but required immediate action.

Reporting process

The disclosures were formally reported to:

- The Department of Social Development
- The CYCC's head office

Disclosures were compiled collaboratively by the volunteer team so that concerns could be reported by the coordinator according to legal safeguarding procedures.

Though the LiA ended abruptly, the long-term safeguarding impact should outweigh the short-term disruption. The reporting process and organisational changes that followed should not only bring about positive changes for the children currently residing at the CYCC, but also for future children under the care of this organisation. The long-term, sustainable impact of this LiA is therefore very significant, even though it was not the type of impact we were anticipating.

Organisational response

The head office acted swiftly:

- A senior staff member implicated in multiple disclosures was fired.
- A second staff member was placed in disciplinary hearings.
- Head office took over the site with intentions to assess the current state of the CYCC and make imminent improvements.
- New staff are in the process of being recruited.

Structural and long-term impact

The safeguarding actions produced significant organisational change:

- Removal of unsafe staff improved the immediate safety of children.
- The centre's leadership was forced to confront systemic safeguarding failures.
- The children witnessed adults taking their disclosures seriously, reinforcing the value of speaking up.
- The actions taken may influence future staff behaviour and organisational culture.

Empowering children

The safeguarding process had profound psychosocial impact:

- Children learned their voices matter.
- They saw that reporting abuse can lead to real consequences.
- They gained confidence in advocating for themselves.
- They experienced justice and accountability, which may shape how they approach future life experiences
- They learned that they do not have to accept neglectful or abusive treatment, an understanding which may translate to future relationships

3C's Leadership Model

1. Capacity

1a. Performance

Throughout the LiA, I demonstrated strong critical thinking and reflective practice, particularly in navigating the ethical complexities of delivering mental health support within an environment facing serious safeguarding concerns. The mental health workshops required adaptive strategy as I adjusted my workshop content based upon my observations of what the children most needed. Creativity and problem solving were also required in order to contribute to the development of organisational recommendations for mental health support after I was no longer able to deliver my programme onsite. Ambition was reflected in the scope of the mental health and wellbeing programme, which aimed to address multiple unmet psychosocial needs within a short timeframe and in an unfamiliar environment and culture.

1b. People

The programme relied heavily on communication, emotional intelligence, and the ability to build trust with children who had experienced significant trauma. A collaborative mindset was essential, both within the volunteer team, and later when liaising with the organisation's head office during safeguarding reporting. The work required sensitivity to diverse backgrounds and experiences, and aimed to provide the children with the mental health support and education that other children born into more fortunate circumstances have easier access to and oftentimes less need for, aligning with principles of diversity, equity, and inclusion (DEI). The placement also strengthened my sense of global citizenship, as I engaged with cross-cultural contexts and contributed to wellbeing and safeguarding within an international setting.

1c. Process

Delivering three workshops per week alongside 1:1 sessions required active project management, prioritisation, and time management. The safeguarding escalation demanded swift coordination with fellow volunteers to produce documentation in adherence to reporting procedures. Impact measurement relied on qualitative indicators such as engagement levels, behavioural evidence of learning, and increased demand for 1:1 support. Problem-solving and design thinking were applied when developing recommendations for sustainable mental health provision within the CYCC.

2. Character

The placement required a high degree of character-based leadership. I demonstrated accountability in responding appropriately to safeguarding disclosures and ensuring they were reported appropriately and promptly. Courage was necessary in navigating emotionally difficult conversations and advocating for the children's safety despite potential backlash. Integrity was demanded in all interactions, particularly in maintaining confidentiality, respecting boundaries, building trust and rapport, and prioritising the wellbeing of the children.

Humanity, humility, and compassion were central to the mental health programme, as the work involved listening without judgement, validating emotions, and providing a safe space for expression. Temperance was reflected in managing my own emotional responses while supporting children experiencing distress. Judgement was essential in distinguishing between issues appropriate for 1:1 support and those requiring formal safeguarding escalation. The safeguarding process also required a drive for change and justice, alongside collaboration, as the volunteer team worked collectively to ensure disclosures were handled responsibly and promptly.

3. Change-Maker Values

The placement strengthened several change-maker values. I demonstrated **ambition** in designing a programme that addressed multiple aspects of mental wellbeing within a limited timeframe. **Bravery** was evident in responding to safeguarding disclosures and supporting children through difficult conversations. **Curiosity** informed the development of workshop content and the exploration of culturally relevant approaches to mental health education.

The work required **determination**, particularly in maintaining consistency and emotional presence despite the intensity of the environment. The programme aimed to deliver **extraordinary** value by providing support that the children were not previously receiving. The safeguarding escalation demanded **fast** action and **good** judgement, ensuring that children's safety was prioritised and institutional accountability was upheld.

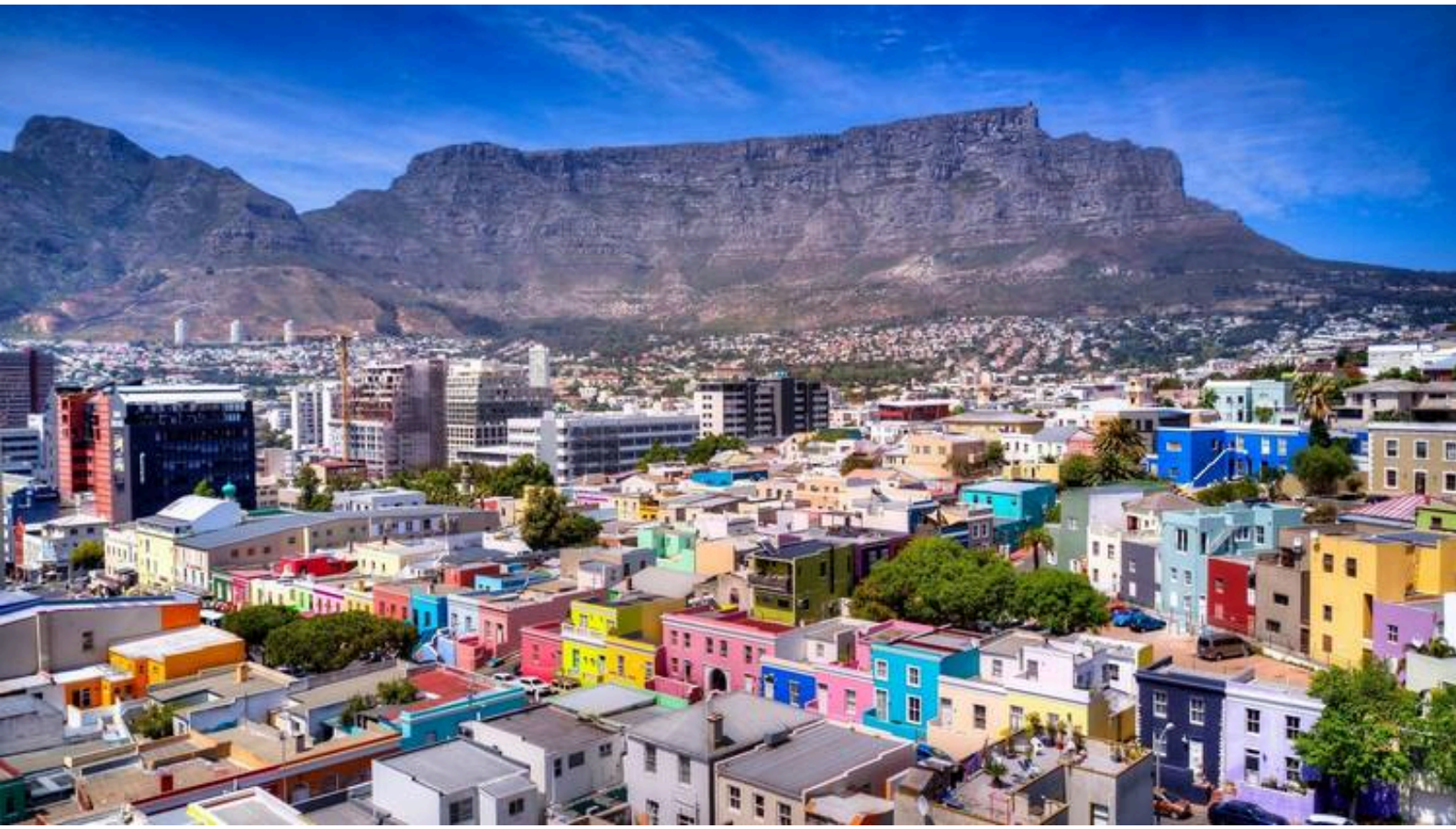
Conclusion

The placement at the Child and Youth Care Centre in Cape Town generated meaningful impact across both planned and emergent areas of work. The mental health and psychoeducation programme provided structured support to girls aged 11–16, addressing significant gaps in emotional wellbeing provision and contributing directly to SDG 3: Good Health and Wellbeing. Through workshops and 1:1 sessions, the programme facilitated increased engagement, strengthened emotional literacy, and created a safe space for expression, reflection, and early development of healthier coping strategies. Qualitative indicators demonstrated clear behavioural evidence of learning and highlighted the value of consistent, trauma-informed support within the CYCC.

Alongside this planned work, the placement produced substantial safeguarding impact aligned with SDG 16: Peace, Justice, and Strong Institutions. Multiple disclosures of abuse and neglect were handled through appropriate reporting pathways, resulting in the removal of unsafe staff and prompting organisational accountability. These actions contributed to improved safety for current and future children and reinforced the importance of responsive safeguarding systems within child welfare institutions. The safeguarding process also empowered the children, demonstrating that their voices could lead to tangible change.

This LiA further strengthened leadership capacity through critical thinking, collaboration, ethical judgement, and adaptive problem solving, as reflected in the 3C's leadership framework. Recommendations presented to the organisation's head office offer a pathway for sustaining and expanding mental health and safeguarding support beyond the duration of the placement.

Although the project concluded earlier than anticipated, the combined psychosocial, educational, and structural outcomes represent a significant contribution to the wellbeing and protection of young people with the CYCC. With continued commitment to trauma-informed practice, mental health provision, and robust safeguarding procedures, the organisation is well positioned to build on these foundations and create a safer, more supportive environment for all children in its care.



Alexia Kirwan-Jones
Durham University
alexia.l.kirwan-jones@durham.ac.uk