CAN A HOLISTIC COACHING AND REFERRAL PROGRAMME ENHANCE WELL-BEING AND EMPLOYABILITY AMONGST NEET YOUTH?

| EVIDENCE FROM THE PILOT OF THE BASIC PACKAGE OF SUPPORT |

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ABSTRACT

In response to high and increasing rates of youth unemployment and a growing cohort of youth who are not in employment, education and training (NEET), the Basic Package of Support (BPS) for youth was developed. It takes as its starting point that young people who are disconnected from learning and earning opportunities are often in this situation because of the multiple barriers they face, arising from the structural and multifaceted nature of poverty. Furthermore, when they try to access services to help them overcome these challenges, they experience these services as being isolating and unfriendly.

The BPS set out to address these dual challenges by introducing a youth-centred programme that proactively reaches out to disconnected and discouraged NEET youth, engages them in a holistic assessment of their lives, coaches them to understand what they want to achieve in life, and actively refers them to available services and opportunities that can enable them to overcome barriers and connect them to learning and earning opportunities. Simultaneously, it engages local service providers that young people are likely to engage with, and invites them to collaborate in a Community of Practice aimed at building a stronger understanding of their role in supporting young people's transitions to learning and earning, and at developing active problem solving and collaboration to improve service delivery to youth.

The programme's dual aims are a) to improve young people's well-being, sense of belonging, and navigational capacity so that they are able to (re)connect to learning and earning opportunities and stay in these opportunities for longer periods of time; and b) to improve service delivery to young people in local communities so that youth no longer "fall through the cracks", and are better supported in their transitions towards learning and earning.

The programme was piloted between the beginning of 2022 and the end of 2023 in several sites in Gauteng, KwaZulu Natal and the Western Cape. In this report we present data on the profile of young people who take up the BPS opportunity, and what their well-being, navigational capacity and employability outcomes are as they progress through the programme. We draw on qualitative and quantitative data derived from a concurrent triangulation mixed methods design that formed the basis of the monitoring and evaluation during the pilot phase.

These findings demonstrate improved outcomes across several domains of well-being including self-reported quality of life, mental health and sense of support. They also show improved ability to handle stress and access to services – indicators of improved navigational capacity. Finally, we see that by the time participants have completed three coaching sessions almost 40% of them have reconnected to some form of learning or earning opportunity.

The findings demonstrate that young people who take up an individualised, multifaceted coaching programme experience improvements in their lives that draw them closer to opportunity, and that indeed, two-fifths are able to make connections to learning and earning again, even after a small number of sessions with a coach. What remains to be understood is whether young people stay in these opportunities to completion, and whether the programme places them on a better footing for longer term trajectories towards sustainable work and learning. The report provides evidence of the value of individualised coaching and referrals for particularly vulnerable young people for whom more support to connect to opportunity seems to be necessary.

1 INTRODUCTION

Over the past decade, South Africa has consistently faced high rates of youth who are not in employment, education or training (NEET). In 2023, over 3.4 million youth aged 15 to 24 were NEET, accounting for 33.3% of the youth population. The vast majority of these young people are new entrants to the labour market – i.e. they have never worked before – and large numbers have been looking for work for well over a year (Mudiriza & De Lannoy, 2023).

Globally, the large number of young people who are not in any kind of employment, education or training is cause for great concern. At the societal level, large numbers of youth who are NEET are predicted to lead to negative economic consequences such as lost output, lost government revenue, and increased public spending, for instance in areas like the criminal justice system, social protection, and social welfare services (Branson et al., 2019; Hall et al., 2015). At the individual level, a multidisciplinary body of evidence indicates associations between being NEET, and especially remaining NEET for an extended period of time, and negative outcomes such as deteriorating physical and mental health, substance abuse, precarious job prospects, discouragement, social exclusion, and increased risk behaviour (Franzman & Kassman, 2005). As persistent economic and social exclusion may lead to discouragement and poor mental health, it feeds a vicious cycle of 'social drift', as depicted in Figure 1 (Branson et al., 2019; Gariépy et al., 2021; Rahmani & Groot, 2023), which ultimately makes it more difficult for youth to take up, and remain committed to opportunities, even when they are available.

Figure 1: The poverty and mental disorders cycle
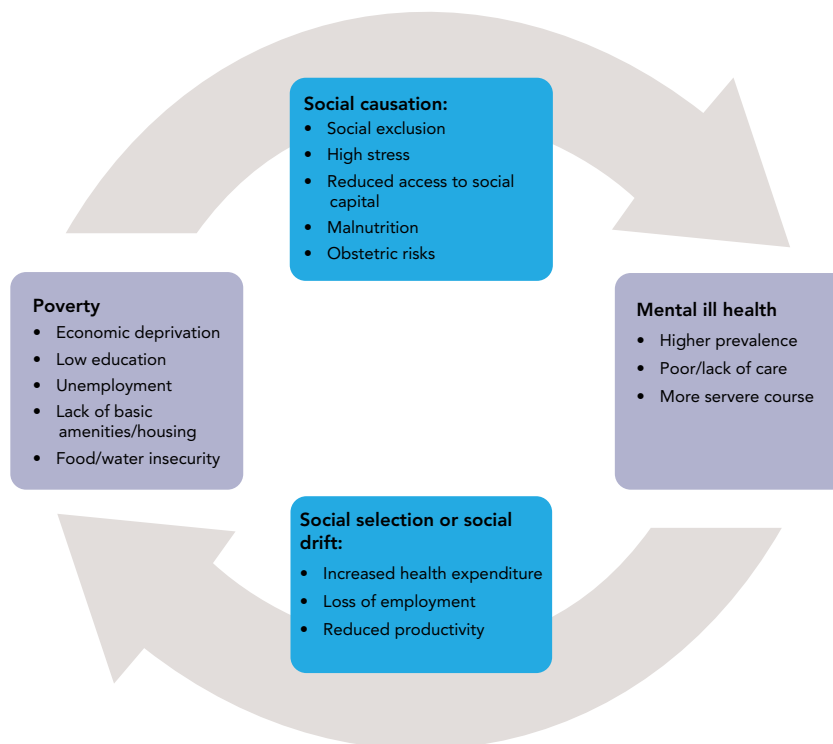
Source: Lund, C., de Silva, M., Plagerson, S., Cooper, S., Chisholm, D., Das, J., Knapp, M. & Patel, V. (2012) *Poverty and Mental Disorders: Breaking the cycle in low-income and middle-income countries.* PRIME Policy Brief 1. Cape Town: Programme for Improving Mental Health Care, UCT.

Despite numerous state and non-state led programmes and interventions aimed at supporting young people's transition into learning and earning opportunities, South Africa has been unable to shift this situation (Muduriza & De Lannoy, 2023). In response to this challenge, and based on international and local best-practice evidence, we designed the Basic Package of Support (BPS) as an intervention to support young people who are NEET, and to (re)connect them to learning and earning opportunities. Drawing on both qualitative and quantitative data collected from participants of the programme over the first year of pilot implementation, this report provides the evidence of how programme participants' well-being, sense of belonging and navigational capacity have shifted, and the extent to which these young people have been able to take up learning and earning opportunities.

Background to the Basic Package of Support (BPS)

Drawing on international and national evidence on what could work to reconnect youth to learning and earning opportunities, the Southern Africa Labour and Development Research Unit (SALDRU) at the University of Cape Town and the Centre for Social Development in Africa (CSDA) at the University of Johannesburg led a consortium of academic, civil society and policy partners to develop the design and implementation model for a Basic Package of Support for NEET youth (BPS) (De Lannoy et al., 2019). The combination approach of BPS is based on the recognition that young people in South Africa continue to face significant and multiple challenges, many of which interact to exclude them from education and work. Large numbers of youth do not complete high school, and must attempt to get work without the education and skills required and rewarded in the labour market or without access to the social and cultural capital that could help them navigate access to further education or employment. They make these attempts whilst also facing a range of other challenges rooted in the systemic nature of poverty (Patel & Graham, 2021) such as food insecurity, low income to allocate to job search and childcare, and housing insecurity. Furthermore, they operate under significant resource constraints and often experience available services and opportunities as inaccessible or youth unfriendly. Very few interventions in South Africa take these interconnections into account. Instead, the plethora of state and non-state programmes that offer youth education, work, health and social services support are poorly coordinated and often address only one aspect of youth needs at a time. As young people struggle to access services, they inevitably lose contact with formal systems, and are then difficult to reach for reconnection. BPS, therefore, proposes a pro-active, multi-faceted approach that is able to solve these multiple interacting barriers in a young person's life.

The programme draws on the example of the European Union (EU) Youth Guarantee and lessons that emerged from a range of EU Member States and is inspired by the application of similar approaches by countries outside of the EU. Lessons were also drawn from rigorous evidence-based reviews and research on multifaceted interventions (De Lannoy et al., 2019).

The ultimate aim of a BPS for young people who are NEET in South Africa is to help them (re)connect to education or training opportunities, or to enter the labour market as part of a successful transition into young adulthood. The BPS strives to provide young people with a sense of possibility and to support their agency and ability to take up pathways towards sustainable livelihoods. Broadly speaking, BPS promotes youth-centred approaches to supporting youth who are NEET to transition to learning and earning by:

1. *Delivering an evidence-based programme* that consists of two core components:

     i. Provides individualised coaching to address the multiple and complex barriers to accessing opportunities that youth who are NEET face, *AND*

     ii. Works with local service partners to improve service delivery to young people, in a Community of Practice (COP) approach;

2. *Advocating* for a more youth-centred and integrated approach to addressing the needs of youth who are NEET by drawing lessons from the evidence and our programme evaluations.

Figure 2: The components of the Basic Package of Support for NEET youth

What does a package of support for NEET youth look like?

AIM: Young people who are NEET gain a sense of possibility. They are supported in their agency to take up pathways appropriate to their individual circumstances and that will ultimately lead them back into education or the labour market.
Young people who are NEET show increased well-being, navigational capacities and increased employability. They spend more time in employment, training and/or education.

Programmatic intervention
- Face to face
- Proactive outreach
- Holistic assessment
- Tailor-made action plan
- Well-targeted, multi-faceted
- Builds agency through support to (re)connect
- Ongoing follow-up
- Connects to local services/ opportunities

Policy approach
- Understands multiplicity of deprivations
- Coordination between different departments and 'systems'
- Prevents young people becoming invisible and 'falling through the cracks'
- Higher levels of accountability for delivery of quality services

The programme works to strengthen young people's agency and improve their self-esteem, self-efficacy, social inclusion, mental health, and well-being - all prerequisites for economic productivity. It also aims to offer them a sense of possibility and belonging, by providing them with problem-solving tools, clarifying possible pathways forward, and linking them to opportunities that can enhance their progress in life.

DEFINITION OF KEY CONCEPTS

The Basic Package of Support seeks to improve well-being, employability and navigational capacities amongst young people who are not in employment, education, or training and who may have become discouraged. These concepts are conceptually diverse; we therefore provide a brief definition for each of them here.

Employability is a complex term that refers to several aspects of preparedness for work. It is an indicator of a person's opportunity to 'progress towards, gain, sustain or move on in employment' (McQuaid & Lindsay, 2005, in Storme et al., 2019: 3; see also Thijssen, Van der Heijden and Rocco, 2008). It refers to several aspects of competence, including skills, but also refers to the capability to navigate the labour market or, for instance, the ways in which "individuals mobilize, present and update their resources in the context of the job market" (Romgens et al., 2020: 3). For the purposes of this research, we are interested in orientation to the labour market as the first step in being able to navigate the labour market, as well as whether individuals have the basic documents in place that form part of the resources to support work search. Thus, we are interested in the very first steps that individuals take towards navigating the labour market competently. While we do not include technical skills assessments in the programme's approach, we gather some information on educational levels among young people upon entry, and track whether youth transition from being NEET into training or education (or employment) opportunities, thus providing us with a proxy for skills building. At the pilot stage, we did, however, not engage with how those skills relate to the demand for skill at the local levels, nor did we engage extensively with employers. These are aspects that will be added to a later phase of the work.

Like employability, *well-being* too is a complex and multifaceted concept. It accounts for aspects ranging from (perceived) quality of life through to mental health. Well-being can be defined as being concerned with "effective functioning, sense of purpose and flourishing" (Dooris et al., 2018). In this study we assume that improvements in quality of life (often operationalised as ensuring people have access to basic services and the means to meet their needs. See, for instance, Greyling & Tregenna, 2017), result in improvements in well-being. Furthermore, lack of well-being can often emerge as poor mental health (increased anxiety and feelings of being overwhelmed, as well as psychological distress). We assume therefore that improvements in mental health indicators should indicate improvements in well-being.

Finally, the concept of *Navigational Capacity* refers to an individual's or group's ability to maintain a sense of direction in life, and to the skills required to understand, access, and utilise resources and opportunities in order to move closer to, and ultimately achieve, one's desired outcomes. Appadurai (2004: 69) refers to people's "understanding of how to navigate the dense combination of nodes and pathways that lie between present and imagined futures". The concept is broad, and encompasses, amongst others, people's ability to aspire to change, but also involves problem-solving abilities, interpersonal competencies and access to resources that enable individuals to navigate the challenges they may encounter on the path to a desired future (See, among others. Narayan, 2005; Marzi, 2016). For the purpose of this research, we included a number of indicators such as young people's ability to handle stress, ask for help, and access services as proxies for our understanding of navigational capacities.

Aim and objectives

The aim of the research reported on in this paper was to evaluate the achievement of the key anticipated outcomes of employability and well-being, for the young participants in the BPS programme. The objectives were to:

- Provide a demographic profile of youth involved in the BPS programme,

- Present an overview of the vulnerabilities experienced by participating youth,

- Outline baseline indicators for employability and well-being among these individuals,

- Determine changes in participant well-being and employability during their involvement in the BPS programme.

It is important to note that this pilot phase did not include an impact assessment. The primary purpose of the pilot was to implement and refine the programme based on experiential insights. Multiple iterations were made during this phase as we gauged effective aspects, and areas requiring improvements. While crucial for programme development at this stage, these adjustments would have complicated any impact assessment. Therefore, while we examined shifts observed among participants throughout their engagement with the programme, definitive conclusions regarding the extent to which these changes resulted from programme involvement cannot be made.

Overview of methodology

We used a concurrent triangulation mixed methods design, collecting and analysing quantitative and qualitative data separately and then triangulating the data to enhance our understanding of the results. The quantitative component involved an intake survey assessing demographics, household situations, employability, and well-being, followed by a second survey after participants completed at least three coaching sessions. Data were analysed descriptively and with bivariate analysis to assess changes over time.

The qualitative component included in-depth interviews with youth who had completed multiple coaching sessions. Interviews were conducted six to eight months after pilot sites were opened to explore participants' situations, experiences of coaching, and any shifts in perspective. Participants were randomly selected from those who had completed at least three sessions, and invited to participate in the interviews. Data were analysed thematically and inductively.

Separate teams handled the quantitative and qualitative analyses. Once completed, we compared findings from each component to gain insights for deeper understanding.

The report continues as follows: Section 2 on the BPS and pilot implementation; Section 3 detailing research design and methods; Section 4 presenting findings; and Section 5 concluding with reflections and next steps.

2 THE BPS PROGRAMME

BPS Theory of Change

The project theory of change (ToC) revolves around two interrelated challenges. First, young people face multiple deprivations they need to overcome to reconnect to learning and earning opportunities, but they lack navigational capacity and information to access services that can assist them to overcome these barriers. Second, the services they should be able to access are experienced as alienating. The elements of the programme are each intended to address these challenges with the ultimate result being that young people have better navigational capacity, can access the services that they need, and ultimately are enabled to take up learning and earning opportunities. The ToC is summarised in the statements below:

1. *IF* we proactively reach out to young people and offer them personalised coaching combined with referrals to relevant services and opportunities *THEN* young people will have an improved sense of well-being, navigational capacity and employability.

2. *IF* we work with local service providers in a community of practice approach *THEN* they will begin to collaboratively problem solve to ensure that young people do not fall through the cracks of the existing service provision system.

Ultimately, the BPS is a programme that aims to ensure that young people feel supported, build resilience, and have improved mental health and navigational capacities, *so that they are better able to orientate towards opportunity and, in the longer term, can take up and retain learning and earning opportunities that enable them to overcome poverty traps.* Therefore, key outcomes envisaged for young people in the ToC were:

1. NEET youth would **feel supported, be more resilient** and have **better mental health outcomes**. We tracked improvements in indicators that measure, for instance, self-esteem, self-efficacy, resilience, anxiety, psychological distress, and increased confidence in the future.

2. NEET youth would have **improved navigational capacity.** We would see improvements in help-seeking behaviour, self-regulation and knowledge of, as well as access to, services.

3. NEET youth would spend **more time in employment, training and/or education.** We tracked the percentage of BPS beneficiaries who connected to employment and education/training opportunities, measured at regular intervals throughout the programme.

Measurements used to collect data on the main youth-related outcomes are described in section 3 on data collection.

A young person's journey through the BPS

The BPS programme focuses on engaging youth who are disconnected from educational and employment opportunities, and who may have become discouraged and distrustful of services. In order to reach these youths, peer-to-peer mobilisers were trained to actively seek youth who could benefit from the programme in the community, and to encourage them to enrol. Once a young person expressed an interest in taking part in the programme, they were asked to complete a basic demographic and contact information sheet, before proceeding to an intake session with a coach.

During this intake session, the programme was further explained, highlighting that it is not a job placement initiative and assessing ongoing interest from the potential participant. If still interested, young people were invited to complete a pre-session survey (described in Section 3), although survey completion was not a prerequisite for participation.

Subsequently, the young person scheduled an initial coaching session with an assigned youth coach. In the core BPS sites, these coaches are qualified child and youth care workers who have received additional training to support youths in their learning and employment transitions. The coaching process involved several sessions wherein the participant and coach collaboratively developed a comprehensive understanding of the young person's current situation. This understanding included consideration of household circumstances, income stability, food security status, educational background, and future plans. Based on this holistic assessment, action plans were co-created by coaches and young people to help guide participants towards achieving their goals. Some action plans addressed barriers emerging from challenging household situations such as income insecurity or caregiving responsibilities. Others focused on accessing educational or employment opportunities. Depending on the specific action plan, coaches then referred young people to the relevant services or opportunity providers for further support. These were active referrals, in that the coaches wrote a referral note to the service providers, most of whom were known to the site team (see below). Young people could also request additional support, such as having mobilisers accompany them during interactions with providers. To ensure continued progress towards their goals or to evaluate and adapt existing action plans when needed, coaches regularly followed up with participants, also after referrals had been made.

Finally, participants were assured that they could always return to the programme, even after taking up a learning or earning opportunity, as they might need support to stay with the opportunity and would need support to plan their next steps when they completed an opportunity. There was, therefore, no structured graduation from the programme, with young people leaving when they felt they no longer needed the support.

The site teams, particularly the site managers, played a crucial role in collaborating with local service and opportunity providers, to inform them of the BPS programme and invite them into both Communities of Practice (CoP) and referral networks. This referral network consists of organisations willing to receive BPS participants via coach referrals. Communities of Practice comprise service providers committed to collective problem-solving, to better understanding the challenges faced by young people, to enhance their role in supporting youth transitions, and to improving service delivery capabilities for all youths within their respective areas.

Piloting the BPS

During 2022-2023, SALDRU and CSDA, with support from the European Union, UNICEF South Africa, Tutuwa Standard Bank Foundation, the Innovation Fund and others, and in partnership with the DG Murray Trust, led the piloting of the BPS in three sites: Orange Farm in Gauteng, Atlantis in the Western Cape, and Cato Manor in KwaZulu Natal. These locations were chosen based on an analysis of NEET youth rates and profiles, drawing from the Youth Explorer[i] (2024), as well as stakeholder feedback and service availability within each community.

The primary objective of this pilot phase was to assess the programme's capability to (a) engage and support disconnected youth, (b) implement the comprehensive intervention model within diverse communities, and (c) achieve anticipated outcomes.

The programme components included: proactive outreach to youth who were NEET and possibly discouraged; personalised, holistic coaching; referral to relevant services and opportunities; ongoing support provision; and the establishment of a community of practice for service providers to promote better service delivery to youth.

Throughout the pilot phase, numerous monitoring and evaluation methods were tested, focusing on assessing shifts in employability and well-being among individual young people, to determine if desired outcomes had been achieved. The methods that pertain to the data reported on here are discussed in detail in the next section.

Orange Farm, Gauteng
where 40% of the 16 000 young people aged 15 – 24 years are NEET.

eThekwini, KwaZulu Natal
where 33% of the 667 000 young people aged 15 – 24 years are NEET. [ii]

Atlantis, Western Cape
where 41% of the 13 000 young people aged 15 – 24 years are NEET.
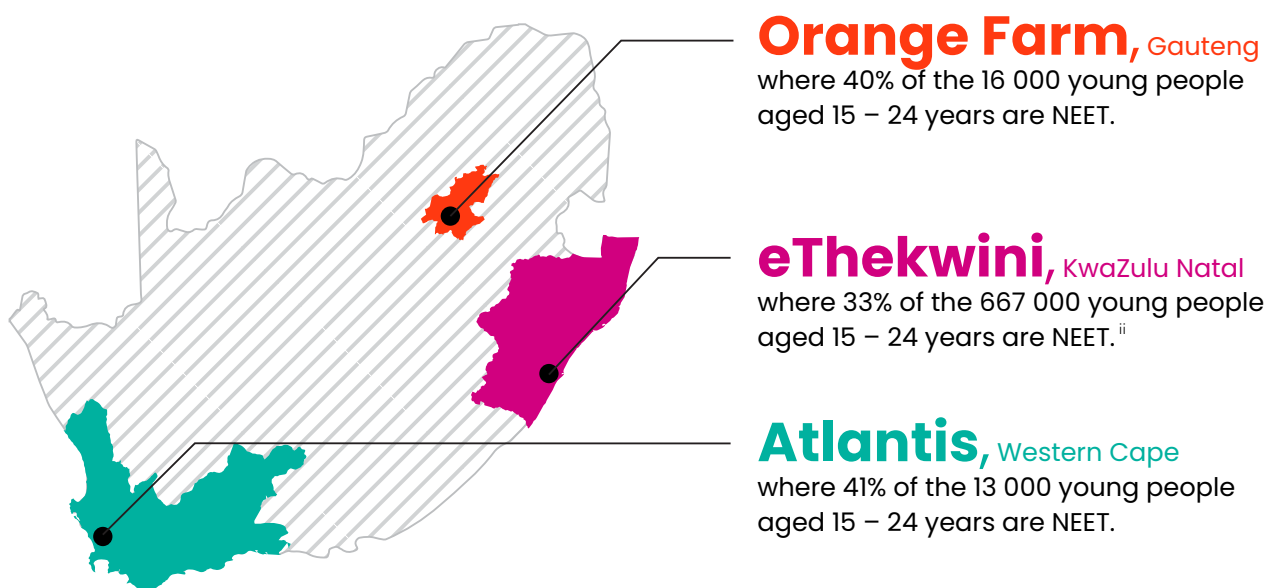
i   www.youthexplorer.org.za
ii The BPS site in eThwekini is based in Cato Manor, approximately 8 km from the Durban city centre. 24% of young people aged 15-24 in Durban main place are NEET.

3 RESEARCH DESIGN AND METHODS

Research Design

In order to assess whether the planned programme outcomes for young people were achieved, we used a concurrent triangulation mixed methods design, in which quantitative and qualitative data were collected during the same phase of the study, analysed separately, and then findings from both sets were compared (Creswell, 2013). The quantitative findings established trends. The qualitative findings were used to assess whether the trends were corroborated and provided a more nuanced understanding. In this section, we outline how the Theory of Change was operationalised for both the quantitative and qualitative components; this is followed by a discussion of each aspect of the mixed methods design. Finally, we discuss how the comparative analysis of the findings was conducted.

Operationalising the Theory of Change

A range of indicators commonly used to assess mental health and well-being were collected along the BPS journey to measure the youth-specific outcomes of interest. Table 1 links the 3 key outcomes of the Theory of Change to the various measurement tools and questions asked in the in-depth interviews. Each of the tools is then described in more detail.

Cantril's Ladder and Life Evaluation Well-being Index

The Cantril Self-Anchoring Striving Scale, or Cantril's Ladder, is a measure of subjective well-being (Cantril, 1965). It consists of a visual representation of a ladder with 10 steps, where each step is assigned a number from 0 at the bottom to 10 at the top. The number 0 represents the "worst possible life", while 10 represents the "best possible life". Respondents are asked to rate both their current and future (in six months-time) life. These ratings can be considered separately, or they can be combined into an index - the Gallup "Life Evaluation Well-being Index" (Gallup, 2024). This approach combines the current and future Cantril ratings, and summarises them into 3 categories: thriving, struggling, and suffering.

Respondents that are classified as "thriving" (current Cantril score of 7 or more, and a future Cantril score of 8 or more) are those whose well-being is rated as strong, consistent and progressing. Those that are classified as "struggling" (current Cantril score of 5 or 6, or a future Cantril score of 5, 6, or 7) have well-being that is moderate or inconsistent. Lastly, those that are classified as "suffering" (current Cantril score of 4 or less, or a future Cantril score of 4 or less) have well-being that is at high risk. In other words, they have poor ratings of their current life situation and negative views of the future.

Table 1: Well-being indicators for measuring outcomes:

Outcomes	Measurement
1: NEET youth feel supported, are more resilient and have better mental health outcomes. Improvements in: self-esteem, self-efficacy, resilience, depression, and increased confidence in the future.	Quantitative assessments conducted at pre-session 1 and post-session 3 timepoints: • Cantril's Ladder and the Life Evaluation Well-being Index- *resilience and confidence in the future* • Generalised Anxiety Disorder (GAD-2) – *anxiety* • *(mental health outcomes)* • Kessler Psychological Distress Scale (K6) – *depression* • *(mental health outcomes)* • Well-being indicators *measures of self-esteem, self-efficacy, resilience and confidence in the future* Qualitative assessments: • Questions about the life situation youth were in prior to joining the programme – how they felt about themselves and their situation. • Questions about how they felt about themselves and their life situation at the time of the interview
2: NEET youth have improved navigational capacities. Improvements in: changes in help-seeking behaviour; improved knowledge and perceptions of available services.	Quantitative assessments: • Well-being Indicators: *measures of stress management, help seeking behaviour and access to services* Qualitative assessments: • Questions about the kind of support youth perceive themselves to have, or have tried to access previously • Views on services they tried to access previously
3: NEET youth spend more time in employment, training and/or education.	Quantitative assessments: • NEET status assessment Qualitative assessments: • Questions about learning and earning situation when joining the programme. • Questions about learning and earning situation at the time of the interview. • Questions about what the participant felt contributed to shifts in their learning and earning journey (where relevant).

Generalised Anxiety Disorder (GAD-2)

The Generalised Anxiety Disorder 2-item scale (GAD-2) is a brief self-report questionnaire commonly used in medical and mental health settings to screen for generalized anxiety disorder. The two questions are: *Over the last 2 weeks, how often have you been bothered by the following problems 1) Feeling nervous, anxious or on the edge?* and 2) *Not being able to stop or control worrying?* Responses and scores include not at all (0), several days (1), more than half the days (2), and nearly every day (3). If a respondent's GAD-2 score indicates a significant level of anxiety, with a score of 3 or more, further evaluation and discussion with a healthcare professional are recommended to determine the appropriate course of action. GAD-2 scores of less than 3 do not require further evaluation (Plummer et al., 2016; Staples et al., 2019) .

Kessler Psychological Distress Scale (K6)

The Kessler Psychological Distress Scale (K6) is a widely used self-report questionnaire designed to assess psychological distress and mental health symptoms in individuals. The K6 consists of six questions that capture various aspects of psychological distress experienced by individuals over the past 30 days. The items cover feelings of nervousness, hopelessness, restlessness, depression, worthlessness, sadness, and fatigue (Anderson et al., 2011; Staples et al., 2019). Respondents rate the frequency of each symptom on a 5-point Likert scale, ranging from 0 (none of the time) to 4 (all of the time). The total score ranges from 0 to 24, with higher scores indicating a higher level of psychological distress. The scale does not provide diagnostic information but serves as a screening tool to identify individuals who may be experiencing elevated levels of distress. Respondents' scores are then aggregated into 4 groups: no psychological distress (0); low psychological distress (score of 1 - 4); moderate psychological distress (score of 5 - 12); and high psychological distress (score of 13 - 24) (Forman-Hoffman et al., 2014).

A series of well-being indicators[iii]

The Well-being Indicator Tool for Youth (WIT-Y) is traditionally an intervention tool, not a research tool. It is used in youth development settings to get a sense of the main domains of concern that a young person might have, so that an organisation can intervene appropriately.[iv] One of the broader aims of the BPS research work, is to test how well this scale works for research purposes, in addition to its use as an intervention tool. As we were working in an intervention-research setting and aimed to get a sense of the well-being of young people across several domains, measures for some of the well-being domains were included to gather a sense of "where young people are" at baseline, and later on. For the BPS context, various WIT-Y questions were incorporated into a survey, and several changes were made:

- The general statements (in crisis, doing ok, doing great) did not work well in the survey questionnaire, so more specific statements were used for each domain that then correlated with the more general WIT-Y statements.

- The Youth Ecological Resilience Scale (YERS), also developed for young people, was consulted. Some statements that were useful in relation to the domains of well-being that WIT-Y asked about were incorporated where appropriate.

In essence, a new scale was developed, largely based on the WIT-Y, with some adaptations. The five domains that were included, are:

1. Safety and Security: This domain captures whether youth have stability of and access to the necessities of life, including a place to sleep, financial security, and a feeling of physical safety.

2. Support and Relationships: This domain captures whether youth are able to form and sustain supportive interpersonal connections with peers, family, and caring adults. This domain includes youths' sense of trust, being able to communicate needs, and manage the influence of peer pressure.

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iii   The Well-being indicators used for BPS are an adaptation of the Well-being Indicator Tool for Youth (WIT-Y)
iv   https://url.za.m.mimecastprotect.com/s/zQcJCxGzD1U1w4KE0C8kOxE

3. Mental Health: This domain refers to youths' self-esteem and their ability to cope with adversity and manage emotions in a constructive way, including asking for help when needed.

4. Community Resources: The term community is used to refer to young people's sense of belongingness and connection to the people, cultures, and places in their lives. Communities also offer accessible resources that are relevant to overall youth well-being. The domain thus also captures young people's understanding of, and trust in, local services.

5. Sense of Purpose: A sense of purpose is youths' ability and recognition of their place in the world and connection to something larger than themselves. This domain encompasses a future orientation about a young person's meaning and purpose in life.

The BPS research work going forward will explore various methods for aggregating the different questions within a domain into a domain score, as well as how the most vulnerable youth could be identified across the various questions and domains. This goal will be addressed in a forthcoming paper. In this report, however, the focus is on those specific questions that captured the various outcomes identified in the programme's Theory of Change.

Quantitative Data Collection

The quantitative data analysed in this paper were collected via a pre-session 1 survey, a post-session 3 survey, and a NEET status survey. These surveys were administered at various points during a young person's engagements with the BPS programme. This process is illustrated in Figure 3.

In the initial phase, a young person enrolled in the BPS programme. At this stage, essential information on an individual's demographic and socio-economic status was collected. These details served as the basis for evaluating the young person's eligibility for programme participation. Factors that might render a young person ineligible included age (being younger than 18, or older than 25 years), currently being engaged in employment, active participation in education and/or training programmes, or residing outside the geographic region covered by the BPS sites.

Youth who met the eligibility criteria then transitioned into active participants in the BPS programme. They were invited to complete the pre-session 1 survey during their induction session, i.e. before receiving their first coaching session. The (voluntary) survey collected further information about the young person's demographics, living situation, education and training, opportunity journey and well-being.

Both the enrolment and pre-session 1 survey data enabled the research and implementation teams to establish a baseline of significant indicators. The analytical focus of this report is on the demographics for an understanding of participant vulnerability, as well as the well-being section, where the core elements of the desired and intended change were measured.

Figure 3: Session and survey questionnaire administration

A follow-up questionnaire, named the "post-session 3 questionnaire", was administered after the completion of the third coaching session, allowing the research team to assess the young person's progress after receiving direct BPS coaching. It covered the same questions as the pre-session 1 survey.

Young people self-completed the surveys on a computer at the BPS site office. If they needed support with understanding any questions, peer mobilisers were available to explain questions. As the pilot is ongoing and young people progress through the programme at their own pace, data collection is ongoing, too. For instance, 100 young people may complete the pre-session 1 survey; 10 may connect to a learning or earning opportunity after session 1 and pause the continuation of their coaching journey; 20 may require several interim sessions before moving to session 2; and so on. The sample thus varied for the different sections of the analysis, and each is explained in detail at the beginning of the section. We limit analysis to the data collected between March 2022 and November 2023.

The collection of the NEET status data happened as part of the Monitoring and Evaluation session notes captured by the coaches after each session. All youth were assumed to be NEET upon starting their very first coaching session, as this requirement was one of the eligibility criteria. During each of the sessions, coaches asked young people about their employment and education and training status, with shifts in this NEET status then captured after each coaching session.

Analysis of quantitative data

The analysis of the quantitative data was conducted in two parts: the first was a descriptive analysis, providing an overall picture of *all* the young people who expressed an interest in the BPS, and then started their journey by completing the pre-session 1 survey. As indicated, it was not compulsory for young people to complete the survey before starting the programme, and there were some who took up coaching without completing it.

In the second part of the analysis, we considered the change over time in the three key outcomes detailed in Table 1. We examined differences in our key outcomes as measured in the pre-session 1 survey and again in the post-session 3 survey. Statistically significant differences indicated that we were indeed seeing improvements in several of the key outcomes of young people.

Qualitative Data Collection

Qualitative data were collected independently from the quantitative data and at various points in time (Graham, De Lannoy & Mthembu, forthcoming).

Approximately six months into the programme's implementation, an initial data collection phase with programme beneficiaries was initiated at each of the sites. This phase involved conducting semi-structured individual interviews with a small and randomly selected subset of young people who had completed three coaching sessions and devised an action plan with their respective coaches.

A second round of data collection took place, again approximately six months after the first round. This entailed both focus group discussions and individual interviews with randomly selected youth from each of the sites. An effort was made to invite both youth who had remained NEET and others who had successfully connected to earning or learning opportunities since joining the BPS programme. The aim of the different waves of data collection was to gather an understanding of (a) the challenges youth had been experiencing prior to joining the programme; (b) how they were experiencing the programme, its different components and the site team members' roles; (c) how they narrated potential shifts in well-being as they had progressed through the programme. Data collection methods and moments were implemented in as standardised a way as possible, across the different sites.

Analysis of qualitative data and triangulation

Data analysis took place thematically and inductively, independently of the analysis of the quantitative data. The qualitative research team transcribed the focus group and interview data and then coded them using Atlas ti® as a data management platform. A subset of transcripts was coded by three researchers independently, with codes being developed from the words of the respondents. The research team then met to review code lists and to agree on an initial code list used for further analysis. Where necessary, new codes were added and shared with the team. Codes were then grouped using the Theory of Change as the framework. The code groups informed the themes that emerged.

Findings emerging from the qualitative and quantitative data analysis were then placed alongside one another to allow a triangulation of insights across both data sets and a deeper understanding of the quantitative results.

In-depth case studies drawing on the qualitative data are written up in separate research reports for each core BPS pilot site. For this report, we draw in the qualitative data that provide nuance to the quantitative data.

4 RESULTS

An overview of the BPS cohort and sample

Data for this report focuses primarily on the participants who completed both the pre-session 1 and post-session 3 surveys. However, we first present a demographic overview of the full BPS cohort (all young people who expressed an interest in the programme), alongside the sample of youth who went on to take up a coaching session, to demonstrate that the two are not substantively different in terms of demographic factors. To do this, we first draw on enrolment data, which is collected for all participants who expressed an interest in the programme regardless of whether they were eligible or went on to take up the programme. In the following section we then consider further information that is drawn from the pre-session 1 survey. This data was for a subset of the participants who a) were eligible for the programme, b) took up the programme, and c) opted to complete the survey.

Table 2 below shows that more than half of all those who expressed an interest were female (62%), and there was an almost even split between the youngest (18-20 year-olds) group and the oldest (21-27 year-olds). Not all youth who expressed an interest took up the coaching offer: we noted an activation rate of just under 50% across all sites (48.77%). Among those who started their coaching journey by completing the pre-session 1 survey, almost 65% were female and over half (53.68%) were in the youngest age category.

Table 2: Demographic information for all young people who expressed interest in the BPS

		Express an interest %(N)	Take-up Cohort %(N)
Gender			
Female		62 (656)	64.15 (331)
Male		38 (402)	35.85 (185)
Age			
18 – 20		49.05 (519)	53.68 (277)
21 – 24		45.09 (477)	40.89 (211)
25 – 27		5.86 (62)	5.43 (28)
Total		100 (1 058)	(516)

The following sections consider the baseline data for the sample of youth who completed the pre-session 1 survey.[v]

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v   Not all young people who take up the coaching have necessarily completed the optional pre-session 1 survey, hence the slightly different samples between Table 2 and Table 3.

Demographic and vulnerability profile at baseline

In addition to the basic demographic information, we considered a range of factors that form the basis of a vulnerability profile of young people[vi], including income, household situation, education level, employment and opportunity search, and care responsibilities. We also disaggregated the indicators by gender, to examine what proportion of all young women and what proportion of all young men were struggling across the various measures.

Table 3: Demographic and socioeconomic vulnerability profile of BPS youth at baseline

	Total % (n)	Female % (n)	Male % (n)
Age			
18 - 20	51 (256)	54.19 (168)	45.83 (88)
21 - 24	43.43 (218)	40.32 (125)	48.44 (93)
25 - 27	5.58 (28)	5.48 (17)	5.73 (11)
School Education			
Less than Grade 9	1.81 (9)	1.30 (4)	2.62 (5)
Grade 9 - Grade 11	29.32 (146)	27.04 (83)	32.98 (63)
Grade 12	51.41 (256)	52.12 (160)	50.26 (96)
Grade 12 with Bachelor's pass	17.47 (87)	19.54 (60)	14.14 (27)
Of Those with a Tertiary Education *			
Trade/occupational certificate	45.74 (43)	45.76 (27)	45.71 (16)
National diploma	37.23 (35)	35.59 (21)	40.00 (14)
Bachelor's or higher degree	17.02 (16)	18.64 (11)	14.29 (5)
Opportunity search: Employment			
Yes	77.15 (385)	76.55 (235)	78.12 (15)
No	22.85 (114)	23.45 (72)	21.88 (42)
Opportunity search: Training/volunteering			
Yes	72.55 (362)	71.34 (219)	74.48 (143)
No	27.45 (137)	28.66 (88)	25.52 (49)
Childcare responsibilities **			
1 or more children/dependents	91.00 (91)	91.14 (72)	90.48 (19)
1 or more children to care for	83.87 (104)	86.46 (83)	75.00 (21)

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vi   The descriptive data here will be used in future analysis to develop a more detailed, multi-dimensional index of vulnerability among youth.

	Total % (n)	Female % (n)	Male % (n)
Household size			
1 - 4 people	41.12 (199)	37.25 (111)	47.31 (88)
5 - 8 people	51.24 (248)	55.03 (164)	45.16 (84)
More than 8 people	7.64 (37)	7.72 (23)	7.53 (14)
Safety			
Home insecurity (having no place to sleep)***	1.2 (6)	1.29 (4)	1.04 (2)
Feeling unsafe***	15.34 (77)	13.23 (41)	18.75 (36)
Financial situation			
No employed adults in the household	31.39 (156)	30.07 (92)	33.51 (64)
Financially insecure (self-reported)***	26.31 (131)	25.82 (79)	27.08 (52)
Financially support 1 or more children	25.72 (125)	32.33 (97)	15.05 (28)
Financial support/in-kind offered to adults	33.81 (164)	30.77 (92)	38.71 (72)

* 19.04 % (95) youth have completed some formal post-secondary education

** Sample sizes in this category are 100 and 124 respectively due to the skip pattern in the questionnaire.

*** Calculated as all those who scored themselves <=2 out of a possible 5 on the well-being indicator question

As seen in Table 3, just over half of the sample were in the 18 – 20 age range (51%), with 43% in the 21 – 24 range, and just under 6% being 25 – 27. The gender age profile followed a similar distribution. More than half of the sample (51%) had a Grade 12, with over 17% having a Bachelor's pass. Around 30% had between a Grade 9 and 11, and under 2% had less than Grade 9. Again, the gender education profile followed a similar distribution. Less than a fifth of the sample (17 %) had a university degree. The vast majority of young people had been searching for employment or training/volunteering opportunities (77% and 73% respectively), with a similar gender distribution.

The majority of those who answered the question indicated that they had 1 or more dependents, (91%), and 1 or more children to care for (84%). Relatively more young women than men indicated having childcare responsibilities (86% versus 75%). However, it is encouraging that three-quarters of the men who indicated having a child also indicated having care responsibilities for the child. The indicators revealed a profile of young people who generally feel safe in their homes. However, somewhat higher proportions indicated feeling unsafe in their communities. Interestingly, young men were more likely to report feeling unsafe in the community (18%) compared to young women (13%). This finding may be attributed to gangsterism and political violence featuring in some of the communities in which the BPS is situated, aspects that tend to affect young men more than women. Just over a quarter of participants (26%) indicated that they suffer financially. The proportion of young women who indicated that they financially support 1 or more children was more than double that of young men (32% relative to 15%).

Well-being at baseline

Having considered the demographic and vulnerability profile of participants, we now provide their baseline scores for emotional well-being, taking into account self-reported quality of life, anxiety, and emotional or psychological distress. It is important to note that the sample size for some of the well-being questions was smaller than the sample that completed pre-session 1. This was probably due to the fact that some of the well-being questions are difficult to answer, probing into young people's emotional responses. As per the ethics guidelines, participants had the option not to complete questions they were uncomfortable with.

Table 4 shows a summary of those in greatest need of help and support in each of the well-being measures. We focus on the lower end of the distribution, to derive a more detailed understanding of the depth and severity of the vulnerable well-being status of young people entering the programme.

Table 4: Emotional well-being indicators for BPS participants at baseline

	Total % (n)	Female % (n)	Male % (n)
Cantril's Ladder			
Now (≤4/10)	53.78 (270)	52.90 (164)	55.21 (106)
In 6 months (≤4/10)	8.17 (41)	8.71 (27)	7.29 (14)
Life Evaluation Well-being Index (struggling or suffering)	87.65 (440)	86.45 (268)	89.58 (172)
Generalised Anxiety Disorder (GAD-2)			
Possible GAD	37.67 (110)	41.85 (77)	30.56 (33)
Kessler Psychological Distress Scale (K6)			
Moderate or high psychological distress	72.60 (212)	78.69 (144)	62.39 (68)
Well-being Indicators (≤2/5)			
How do you feel about yourself	17.13 (86)	16.77 (52)	17.71 (34)
Handling stress and emotions	19.92 (100)	21.94 (68)	16.67 (32)
Ask for help when upset and overwhelmed	32.47 (163)	33.87 (105)	30.21 (58)
How do you feel about your future?	9.76 (49)	10.00 (31)	9.38 (18)
How do you feel about your life?	24.5 (123)	27.10 (84)	20.31 (39)
Do you have something to contribute to the world?	11.03 (55)	11.94 (37)	9.38 (18)

The numbers in Table 4 indicate that a large proportion of the young people who completed the pre-session 1 survey were showing signs of distress and poor well-being. This finding emerged across a variety of the indicators. Over half of the youth entering the BPS programme were not happy with their current lives as indicated on Cantril's Ladder (54%). When looking at the Life Evaluation Well-being index, a remarkable 88% fell into the struggling or suffering categories, showing that these were young people who felt lost, discouraged, and were in a poor mental state. When we interrogated mental health specifically, over a third (38%) presented with a possible generalised anxiety disorder, and no less than 73% suffered from moderate or high psychological

distress.[vii] Despite young people's *current* circumstances, they did anticipate a better future. Responding to the Cantril's question that asked them how they expected to feel in six months' time, the youth were overwhelmingly optimistic about their future lives (>91%). This finding is consistent with several studies that point to young people's positive sense of future, despite dissatisfaction with their current lives (Møller & Robert, 2017; Møller, Roberts & Zani, 2024; Newman & De Lannoy, 2014). When asked how they felt about themselves, 17% were struggling. Just over a quarter were struggling with how they feel about their lives.

The gender disaggregation indicates that the incidence of young women suffering from possible GAD and moderate or high psychological distress was somewhat higher than that of young men (42% and 79% versus 31% and 62% respectively). The incidence rates were largely similar across the other measures.

Table 5: Percentage of young people who were struggling with access to support (≤2/5)

	Total % (n)	Female % (n)	Male % (n)
Well-being Indicators (≤2/5)			
Do you feel a sense of being supported?	18.33 (92)	20.32 (63)	15.10 (29)
Access to family/adult support	31.87 (160)	32.26 (100)	31.25 (60)
Access to peer support	18.73 (94)	24.48 (77)	8.85 (17)
Resource availability in your community	34.46 (173)	34.84 (108)	33.85 (65)
Places to hang out in your community	40.44 (203)	44.19 (137)	34.38 (66)
Do you access resources in your community?	30.68 (154)	30.97 (96)	30.21 (58)

Table 5 details youths' feelings of being supported and accessing resources in their community. In general, feelings of support were low with 18.33% reporting that they experienced low levels of support in general, from adults and from peers. Young men reported considerably higher access to peer support than women (9% of men rated peer support as low relative to 24% of women). Roughly one-third of young people reported a lack of access to, or availability of, resources in their community, with over 40% indicating that they do not have anywhere to hang out.

While we might thus consider most of the BPS beneficiaries to be less 'vulnerable' in the traditional sense of income and physical safety, findings in this section indicate a significant level of vulnerability in other domains of life. Youth at baseline indicated high levels of emotional distress and a distinct lack of availability and access to resources and places to hang out in the community. Many of these young people also suffered from a lack of support from adults/parents and peers.

This baseline picture thus indicates a significant burden of emotional care work for the BPS coaches, even for a group of youth that seems to have otherwise relatively secure households in terms of financial and physical safety and somewhat higher levels of education than many NEET youth. The low levels of emotional well-being and support indicate that some of these young people may need more intensive and longer periods of interaction and coaching to "bring them closer" to the labour market (Duell & de Moraes, 2022).

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vii   There were missing data for the GAD-2 and K6 questions, for which the sample size was reduced to 293. The understanding is that respondents selected not to answer these questions.

Changes in well-being over time: pre-session 1 to post-session 3

In this next section we examine how the well-being of young people changed as they progressed through the BPS programme. Returning to the main outcomes detailed in the Theory of Change, we focus on exploring whether:

- young people feel supported, build resilience, have improved mental health and navigational capacities, so they are better able to orientate towards opportunity (Outcomes 1 and 2);

and, in the longer term,

- can take up and retain learning and earning opportunities that enable them to overcome poverty traps (Outcome 3).

To unpack these questions, we evaluated the changes for the most relevant of the well-being indicators, measured in both the pre-session 1 and post-session 3 surveys, allowing us to explore whether the desired and anticipated change was being observed. Subsequent rounds of data analysis will look at additional indicators. The measurement and interpretation of the indicators presented here are the same as those outlined in the previous section.

The sample for Outcomes 1 and 2 comprises only those young people who have completed both the pre-session 1 survey as well as the post-session 3 survey, amounting to a sample size of 170. Importantly, the fact that only 170 youth have gone on to complete the post-session 3 survey does not necessarily indicate a "drop out" out of the programme: some of the youth who enrolled, may have required additional interim sessions before reaching session 3; others may have taken up a job or training opportunity after session 1 or 2, and may therefore have paused their coaching trajectories, and some will have opted to not complete either pre-session 1 or post-session 3, or both surveys. The shift from NEET to being in employment or education (EET) is reflected in the analysis for Outcome 3.

Outcome 1: Youth have better mental health outcomes, feel more supported, and are more resilient, pre-session 1 to post-session 3

General mental health and well-being improvements were assessed by the Cantril's Ladders and Life Well-being Evaluation Index, as well as the GAD-2 and K6 outcomes. Building resilience includes working on having a positive mindset, growing a strong support network, and seeking help, amongst other things. These aspects are captured by 5 of the well-being indicator questions, alongside the Cantril's Ladder and Life Well-being Evaluation Index.

Sense of well-being

Cantril's Ladder and the Life Evaluation Index

As we saw earlier, in general, BPS beneficiaries did not reflect positive feelings about their current life at the outset of the programme. However, Figure 4 demonstrates a distinct improvement for the cohort that moved from pre-session 1 to post-session 3, with a highly statistically significant difference. Most young people fell into the lower scores in pre-session 1, which indicated suffering: just under 56% of participants indicated a score of 4 or less. However, by post-session 3, only 36% indicated that they were suffering or struggling.

Figure 4: Cantril's Ladder: Where on the ladder do you stand now?
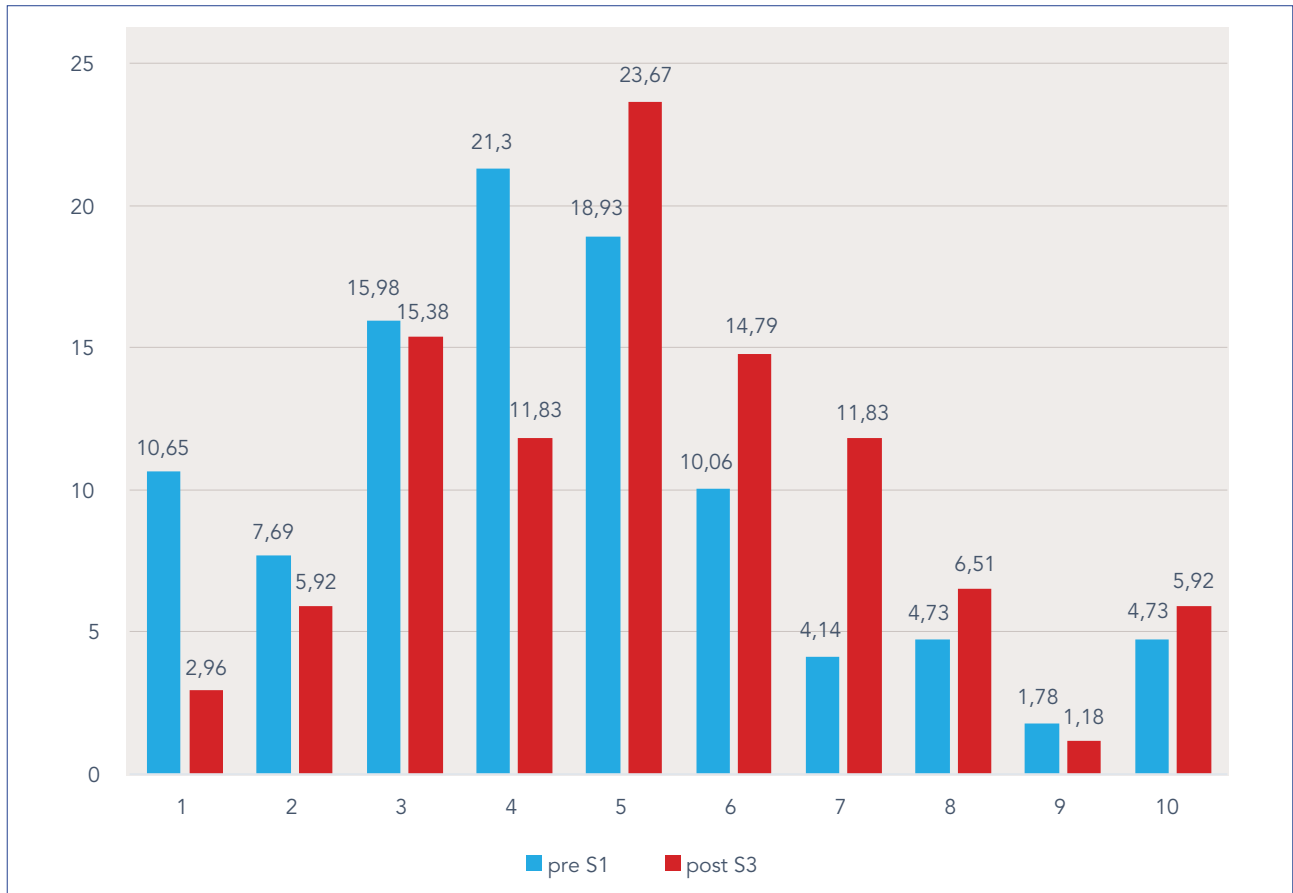
T-test: p = 0.0010

We also observed a considerably more positive outlook for the future life's score for those who completed the first three coaching sessions, as indicated in Figure 5, but this result was not statistically significant. Previous research has demonstrated how young people typically do have a positive future outlook, regardless of current circumstances (Swartz et al., 2012), which may explain why the shifts in how they viewed their life well-being in the future were not significant.

Figure 5: Cantril's Ladder: Where on the ladder will you stand in the next 6 months?
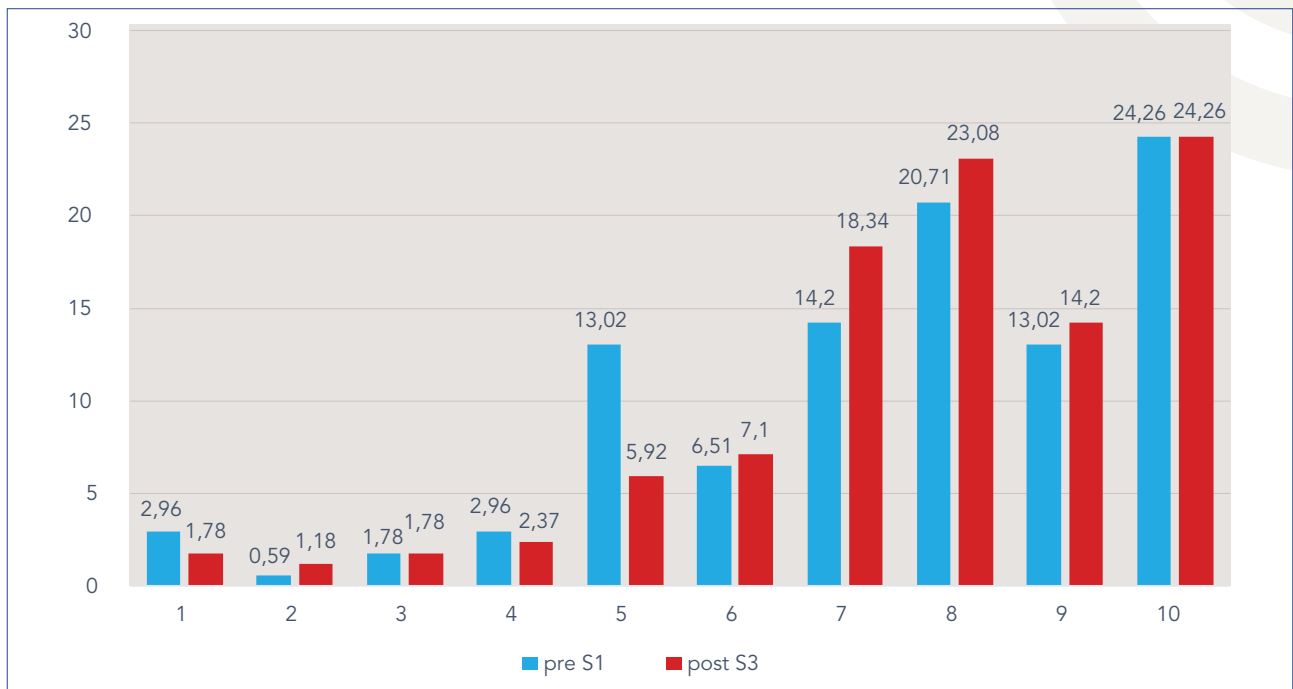
T-test: p = 0.1775

Consistent with the trends observed for Cantril's Ladder, we saw an overall improvement in the well-being of respondents for the Life Evaluation Well-being Index, as shown in Figure 6. There was a statistically significant improvement, with an increase of over 10 percentage points in the number of youth who were thriving post-Session 3 compared to pre-session 1.

Figure 6: The Gallup Life Evaluation Well-being Index
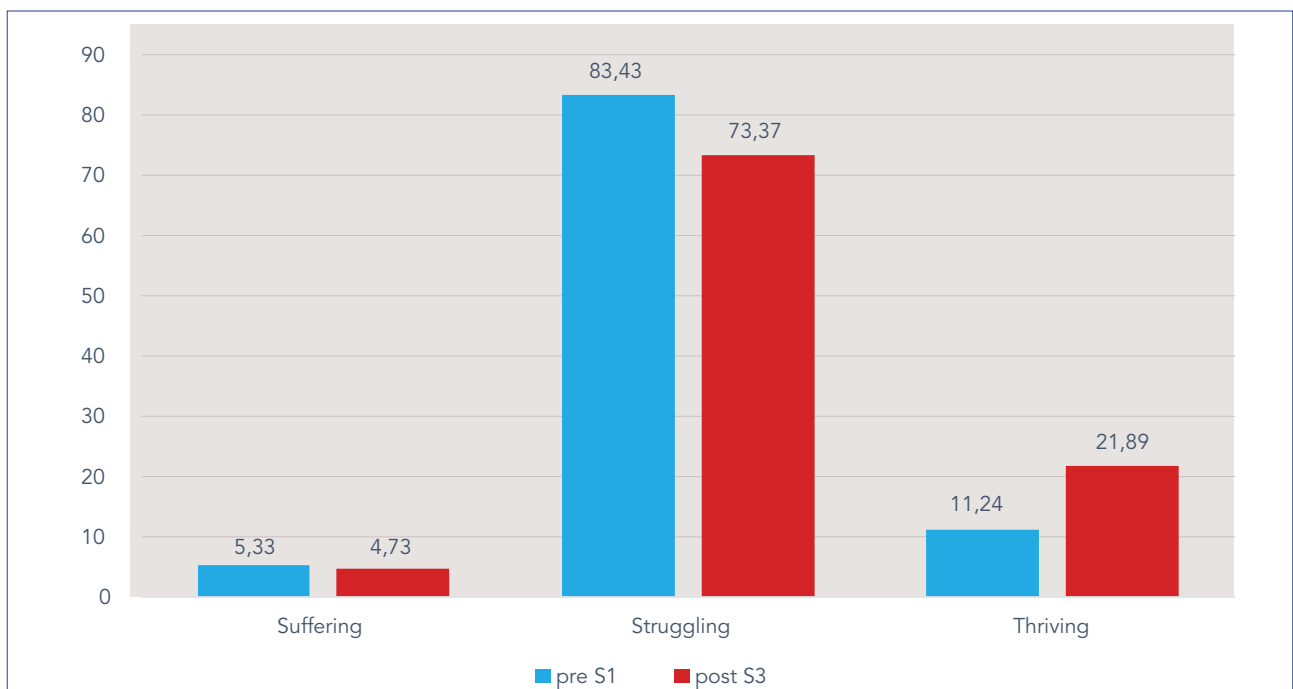
T-test: p = 0.0100

Taken together, these findings on life evaluation well-being demonstrate that young people were feeling more positive about their life following completion of three BPS coaching sessions.

The qualitative data provide some insight into this shift. Participants indicated that, prior to starting the programme, they had been feeling unhappy about life, lost about how to move forward in their lives, and as if they "were stuck". Part of their frustration was not having anyone to talk to about how they were feeling.

> *"I didn't know where I was going in life, what I was going to do, I didn't know where to start. It was a whole blank page for me".* (NEET Female, 21, individual interview participant, Round 2, Atlantis).

> *There wasn't any movement [in my life] and there was no one to talk to and that little bit of support and guidance was not there.* (NEET Female, Round 1 individual interview participant, 21, Orange Farm)

> *"Before I got here, the way I was feeling I didn't think I can do anything progressive about my life. I had finished high school but I didn't know what step to take from there and also, I didn't know what to study for. I can say that I did try, just that I had no information on how I can find certain things like applications. I did try but nothing worked and when I spoke with other people, they told me that no this is what you were supposed to do, get public colleges. I did apply but for these other schools only to find out I can't afford them."* (Male NEET Youth, Cato Manor Round 1)

In contrast, the participants reflected on how the coaching had helped them to feel calmer, more in control and optimistic, as reflected on by a male participant from Cato Manor:

> *"And then, like when I leave, I feel like a little calmer, you know, like I'd come to her before going to work just to talk to her. And then I'd leave for work leaving like feeling, you know, optimistic. And I'd say, hey, I can take this. Yeah. And stuff like that. Coaching helped me cope and feel more optimistic."* (Male employed youth, Cato Manor Round 1)

Having considered the general well-being measures, we now move on to presenting data on the shifts in mental health indicators.

Mental Health

Generalised Anxiety Disorder (GAD-2)

Figure 7 demonstrates a significant improvement in GAD-2 scores, indicating a decrease in anxiety in respondents who completed their third coaching session. Remarkably, almost 40% of these young people presented with possible generalised anxiety disorder at pre-session 1. This finding is important, demonstrating the significant effects of the challenges that young people face in their transition to learning and earning – something that more youth employment programmes need to take into consideration. Importantly, this proportion decreased by 14.85 percentage points after completion of three coaching sessions, with the difference being statistically significant. This reduction demonstrates that having access to forms of support

can help young people to reduce anxiety, which is often associated with feelings of being overwhelmed and unable to take steps to make changes.

Figure 7: Generalised Anxiety Disorder (GAD-2)
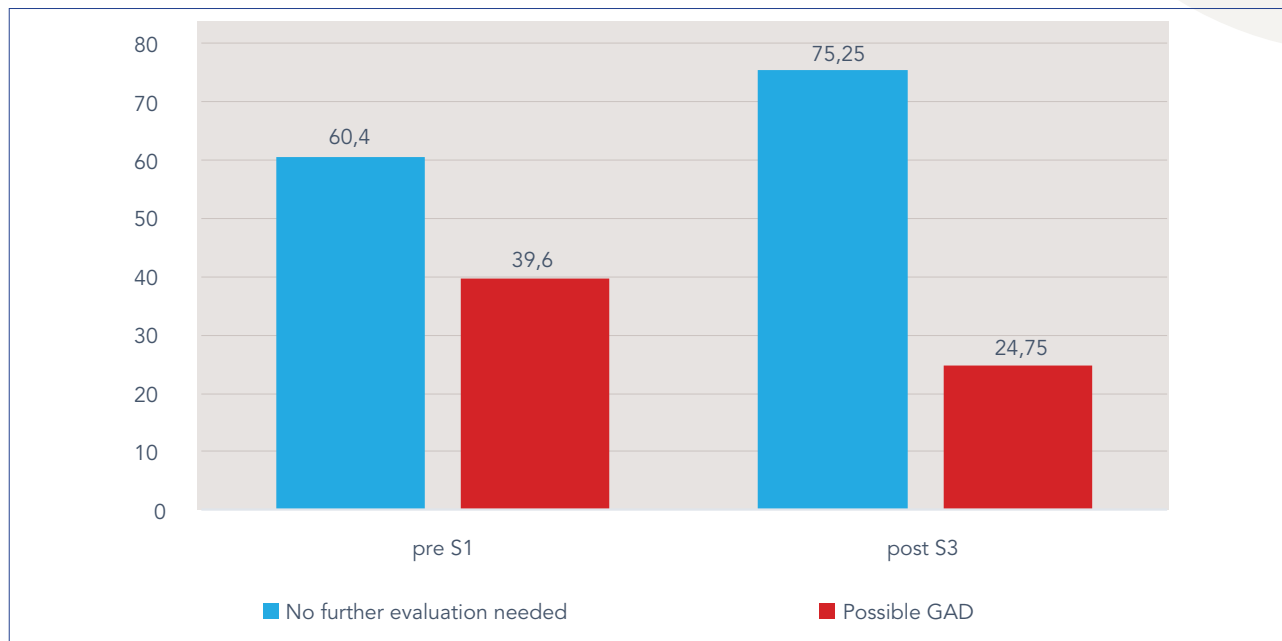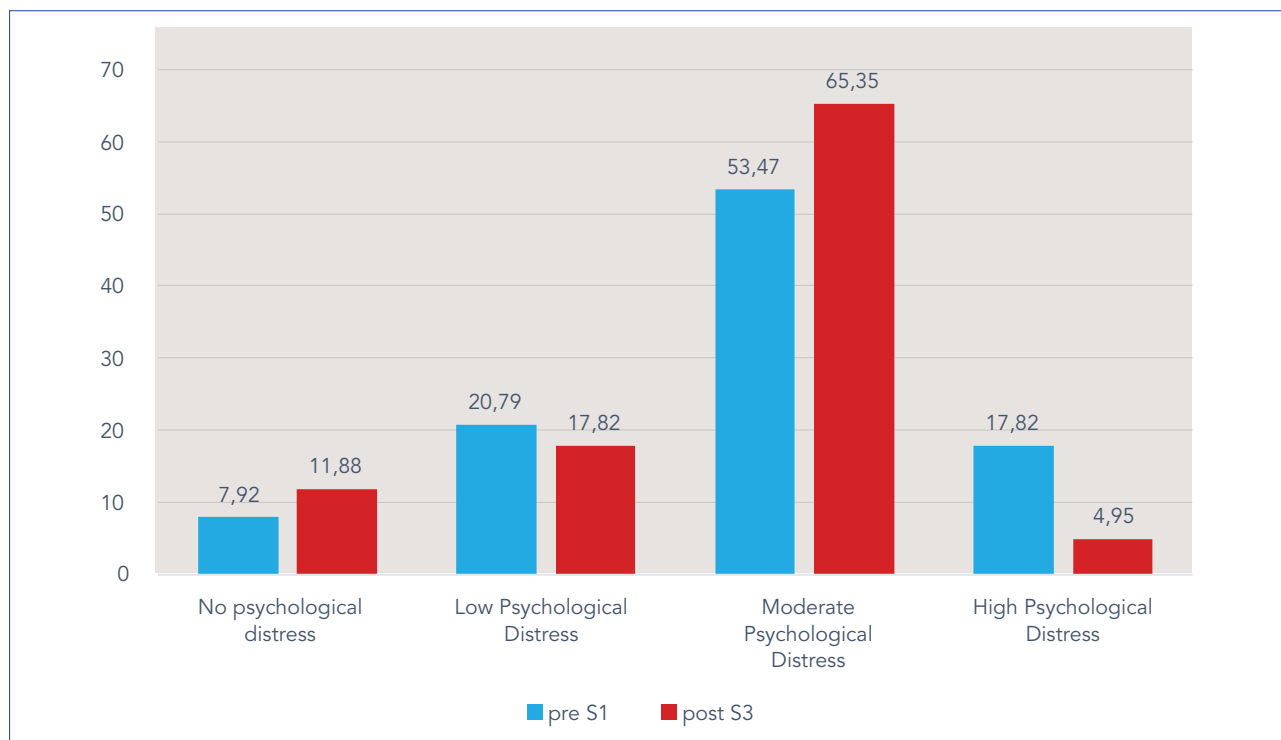

T-test: p = 0.0129

In addition to anxiety, other forms of psychological distress also featured strongly amongst young people who entered the programme.

Kessler Psychological Distress Scale (K6)

Figure 8 reveals that over 70% of participants had either moderate or high psychological distress at baseline, again demonstrating the mental health concerns among a cohort of youth trying to transition to learning and earning opportunities. It shows that almost one-fifth (17.82%) of these BPS participants presented with severe mental distress and additional 53.47% presented with moderate psychological distress. Less than 8% presented with no distress. If, based on the reflections of coaches, we assume this finding to be an under representation of mental ill health, it becomes clear that the burden of care and support that needs to be held by the coaches at the site level, is high. This burden is indeed consistent with reflections of the coaches, and their own personal uptake of mental health support to better help them deal with young people's distress, as the pilot period progressed.

Figure 8 demonstrates shifts in psychological distress over time among youth who completed 3 coaching sessions. While the total percentage of participants with moderate to high psychological distress stayed the same by post-session 3, more had moved from high psychological distress to moderate psychological distress, indicating a reduction in high distress of almost 13 percentage points. The difference in mean scores was significant at the 10% level.

Figure 8: Shifts in distress as measured by Kessler Psychological Distress Scale (K6)

T-test: p = 0.0804

Thus, across the different measures used to assess young people's mental health, we found that significant numbers of young people at baseline presented with possible GAD and moderate to high levels of psychological distress. Among young people who completed the first three of the standardised coaching sessions, we found positive and statistically significant changes.

The qualitative data, collected independently from a randomly selected sub-sample of young people across the three sites, corroborated the mental health concerns that young people had prior to starting their BPS coaching journeys:

*So, **before the BPS, I was very depressed** because I couldn't do anything by myself. Whatever I was trying to do wouldn't work out for my good.* (NEET Female, Round 1 individual interview participant, 19, Orange Farm)

*Through the program, I can say that Sis' M helped me a lot because **most of the time I was feeling like small. When you talk to me, I was feeling angry too quick. I was like a heavy man with depression.*** (NEET youth, Round 2 focus group participant, Orange Farm)

*"To be honest, **I was feeling lonely, wounded, feeling as if like uhm I'm abandoned** because of some trials I was facing in my life, like it was tough yho, bigger than my age."* (Female NEET Youth, Cato Manor Round 1)

The testimonies also supported the results showing positive shifts in mental health among young people as they engaged with the BPS programme and provide us with a sense of *how* BPS was able to establish these shifts:

> *"Before I even knew about BPS, my life was so messed up [...]. When I came here, we did an 'assessing life' about 'who am I'. ...] I didn't know who I am. [...]* ***[Before I met BPS] I would be at home, just like in my bed now*** *or I would be helping my mommy [who had an operation on both her arms and cannot take care of herself right now].* ***[The programme] is actually a thing for me to get up in the morning. It gets me excited. [...] We apply at the colleges now [so I have been getting here every day now], we must get it done now."*** (NEET female, individual interview, Round 1 Atlantis)

> ***All these years I was lost, I was living but not knowing the purpose of living, up until I find this programme called BPS."*** (NEET Male, focus group participant, Orange Farm)

While we do not have the necessary data to allow us to establish causality statistically, the narratives of young people indicate the positive effects of having a trusted person to turn to and to confide in, who provides support, clear guidance and a sense of direction in life. There were also clear references from young people to the supportive nature of the entire site teams, and the safety of a BPS site that provided them with a sense of belonging and that helped them feel less hopeless. We also saw this change reflected in the results of the different well-being indicator questions, described below.

Self-esteem

Figure 9 reflects a somewhat small, yet consistent, improvement in youths' feelings about themselves – a shift we also saw reflected in some of the narratives provided above. A decrease in the proportion of those who felt they could not do anything right (3.55 percentage points) and those who had more things that they did not like about themselves (2.3 percentage points), was supported by an increase in those who generally felt good about themselves (almost 3 percentage points).

Figure 9: How do you feel about yourself?
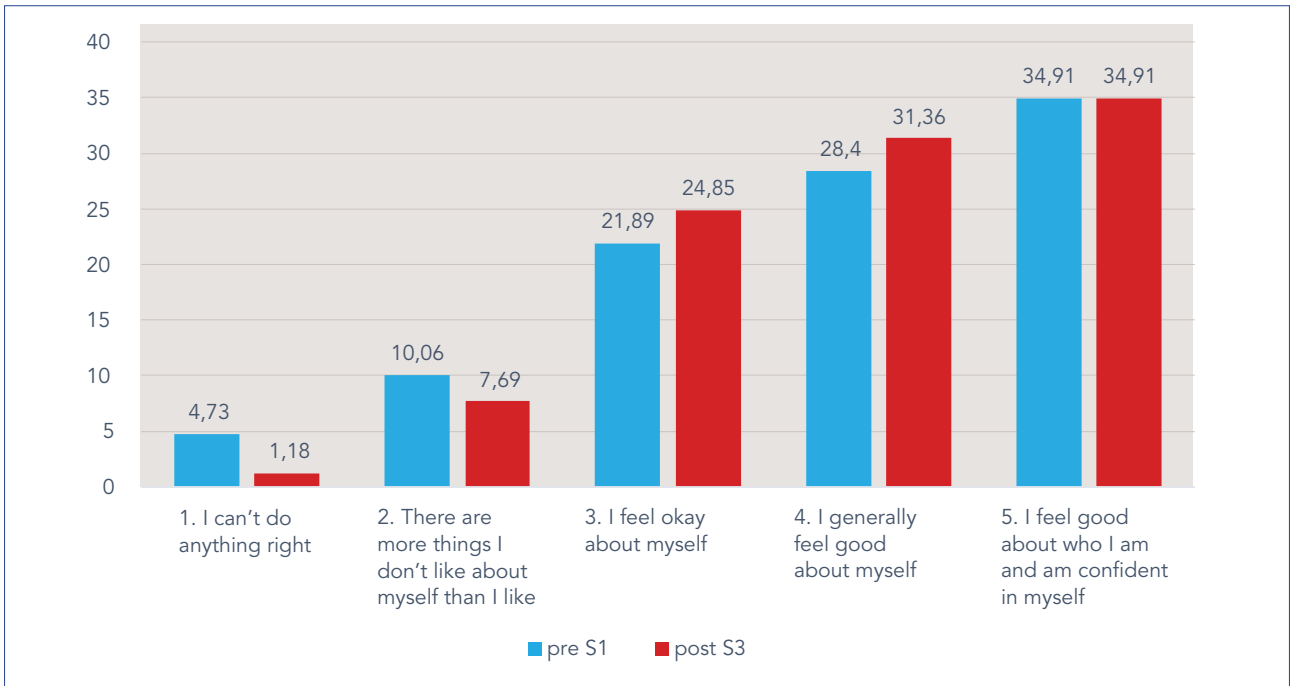
T-test: p = 0.2622

Sense of support

While there was no significant difference in the mean scores for youths' feelings of being supported, Figure 10 does indicate that there were fewer respondents reporting feelings of being isolated and alone, or disconnected from other people. However, this finding was accompanied by small decreases in feeling connected most of the time or consistently. The greatest change was the increase in 'kind of feeling connected' (almost 9%).

Figure 10: Do you have a sense of being supported?
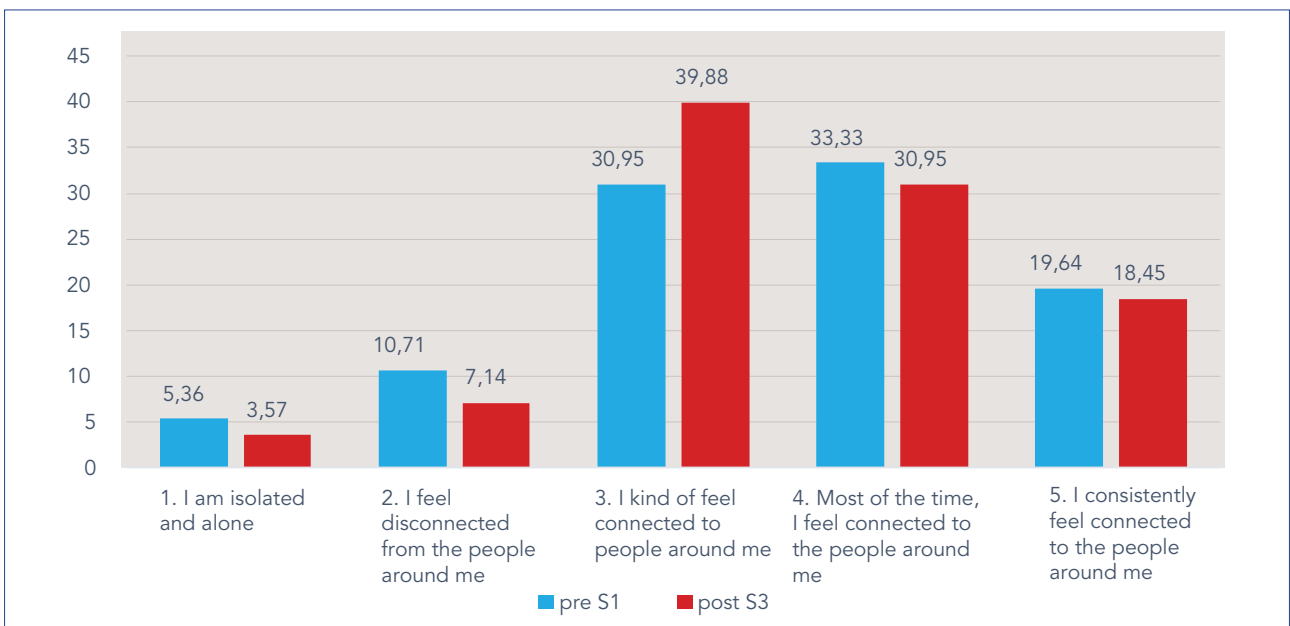
T-test: p = 0.7971

Evidence from the qualitative data provides some insight into, firstly, young people's sense of disconnect, lack of support systems and the absence of help-seeking behaviour prior to joining BPS:

> *This is a bit personal [uhm] I was suffering a lot. I was supposed to go to school this year, so **my father decided to just not fund me at all.** So, he decided to take his money and do his own things and **I felt a lot of pressure because my family would ask me "when are you going to school, have you applied" and those kinds of things.** So, I felt a little bit of pressure which led to my depression.* (NEET youth, Orange Farm)

Secondly, the narratives illustrate how BPS manages to shift that sense of disconnect and to build young people's understanding of how to engage and connect differently, more positively, to people around them. Again, the data show how the trusted role of an individual coach was instrumental in these shifts:

> *Just being able to speak to my coach about anything. She was not exposing me, and she was not talking about me. **I felt like I needed to talk to someone because at that time, I felt like I had a lot of anger [...] I didn't know how to express my feelings towards anyone, and I hated people.**"* (NEET Female, focus group participant, Orange Farm)

> *[..] "I didn't want anyone to help me. I felt like if anyone helps me, it was going to make me weak. Because I trusted myself in everything, but I found out that I needed help. And it's not possible for you to have a journey alone. You cannot name it a journey when you're working alone. So here at BPS like they're sitting here. I've known them for a while, but they helped me a lot. Some of the information I didn't know, I found it by them. **And then I felt more comfortable talking to people. I felt more open** and yeah."* (NEET youth, Round 2 focus group participant, Orange Farm)

We also observed a general improvement in access to peer support, as demonstrated in Figure 11, with the difference in means being statistically significant at the 5% level. The greatest positive change was a nearly 8 percentage point increase in youth indicating that they had friends that they could trust and rely on. This finding was perhaps not surprising as young people would meet the peer-to-peer mobilisers at the BPS sites, would also engage with other young people in peer connect sessions and had simply started spending time at the BPS sites.

Figure 11: Do you have access to peer support resources? pre-session 1 to post-session 3
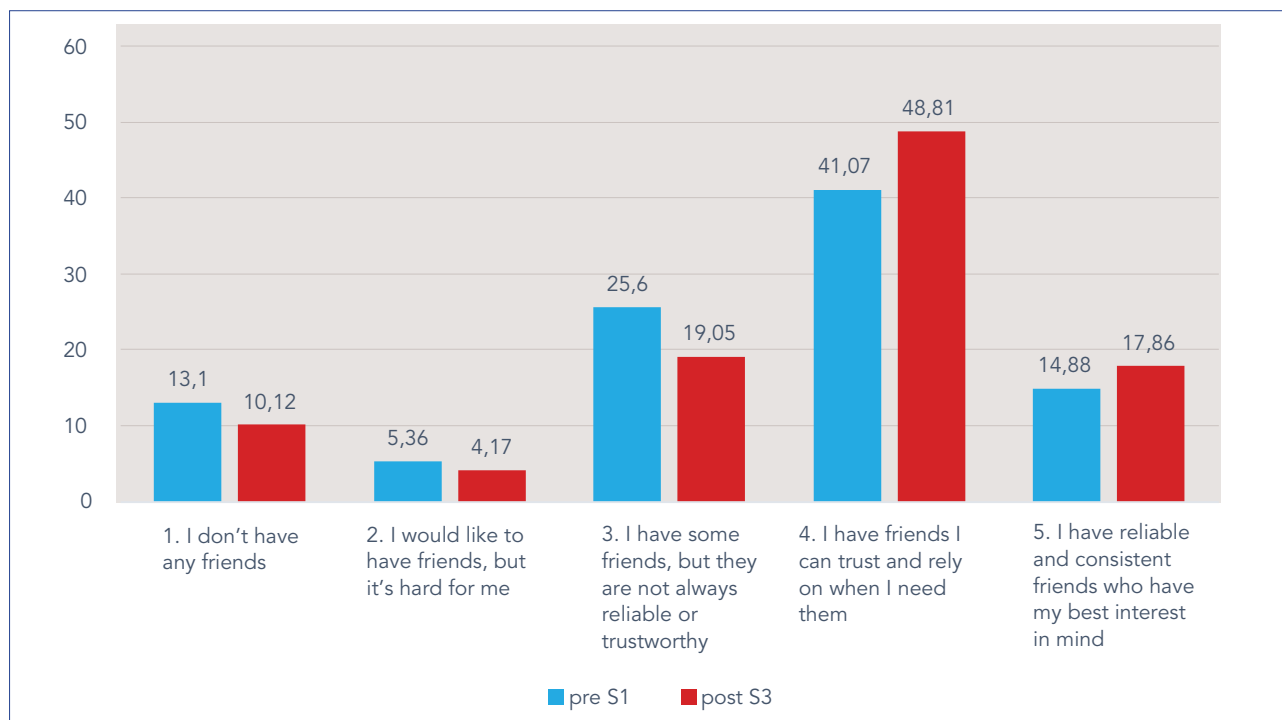
T-test: p = 0.0337

In summary, we noted positive and significant changes in the quantitative indicators related to emotional well-being and resilience in young people who completed just three of the BPS coaching sessions. Qualitative data corroborated the sense of disconnect and discouragement that many of the BPS beneficiaries had experienced prior to starting their coaching journeys. They also emphasised the importance and effect of having a trusted person to confide in and work with to develop an understanding of a way forward and a sense of support in life.

Outcome 2: NEET youth have improved navigational capacities

A second key outcome we hoped the programme would facilitate, was that youth had improved navigational capacities, so they were better able to orientate towards learning and earning opportunities.

While young people have high hopes for their future lives, in order to move their lives forward towards those aspired futures, they need to have the capacity, knowledge and resources to navigate and access the systems and services that can help them realise those aspirations. The BPS coaching process is designed to help youth gain an understanding of what services are available, and how and when to access these. It is also meant to help youth understand how they can move themselves out of a feeling of "stuckness" towards action.

In order to gain an understanding of the different aspects of this outcome, we adapted the WIT-Y to assess certain adaptive skills that people can develop and leverage to support their agency over time. These skills include managing stress and emotions, and asking for help when needed.

Ability to handle stress

The findings are somewhat mixed in terms of how young people handle their stress and emotions, as shown in Figure 12. The difference in mean scores was not significant. The greatest change was the nearly 15 percentage point increase in those who were learning to deal with stress and emotions. Decreases in those who felt overwhelmed and did not know what to do about it, was offset by a decrease in those who indicated that they knew how to deal with their stress and emotions in healthy ways at baseline (10.65 percentage points).

Figure 12: How do you handle stress and emotions?
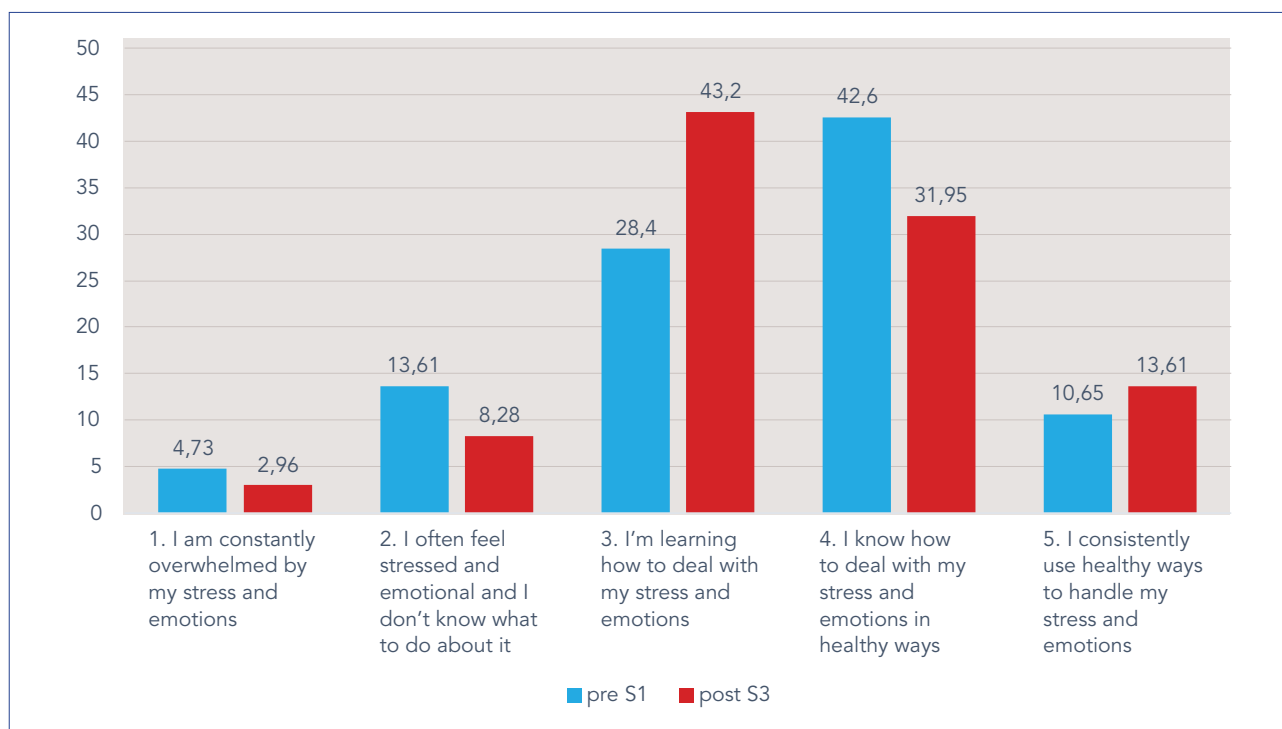
T-test: p = 0.6547

It is difficult to interpret these mixed results, but it is possible that some young people originally over-reported their ability to handle their stress (i.e. in the pre-session 1 survey) and had, through coaching, realised there were more efficient ways to deal with stress. Some young people testified to the positive effect on their stress levels of having a caring place to go to and a supportive BPS team:

> *I felt comfortable [a lot] because they welcomed me really well and **at the present moment, I don't have any stress. I feel like I'm at home.** (NEET Female, Round 1 individual interview participant, Orange Farm)*

An additional question probed young people's actual strategies to deal with feelings of being overwhelmed and feeling upset. When we consider the baseline scores for these indicators, it is clear that young people entered the programme feeling stressed and overwhelmed. At baseline, many young people indicated that they did not ask for help when they were upset and overwhelmed, or felt that no one could help them. Yet, help-seeking is an important protective factor for mental ill health and can improve well-being (Pearson &

Hyde 2020). It is also an important indicator of resilience. Some research also indicates that knowing that there is someone they can reach out to (particularly an adult) is a factor in shaping help-seeking as well as well-being (Hellström & Beckman, 2021).

While the difference in means in Figure 13 was not statistically significant, we found an encouraging and large decrease in youth who felt that they could not be helped or did not seek help (8.28 percentage points). Similar to the shift in the previous indicator, we saw a move towards the middle: young people who were "learning to" or "knew where to get help" when they were upset or overwhelmed.

Figure 13: How often do you ask for help when you are upset and feeling overwhelmed?
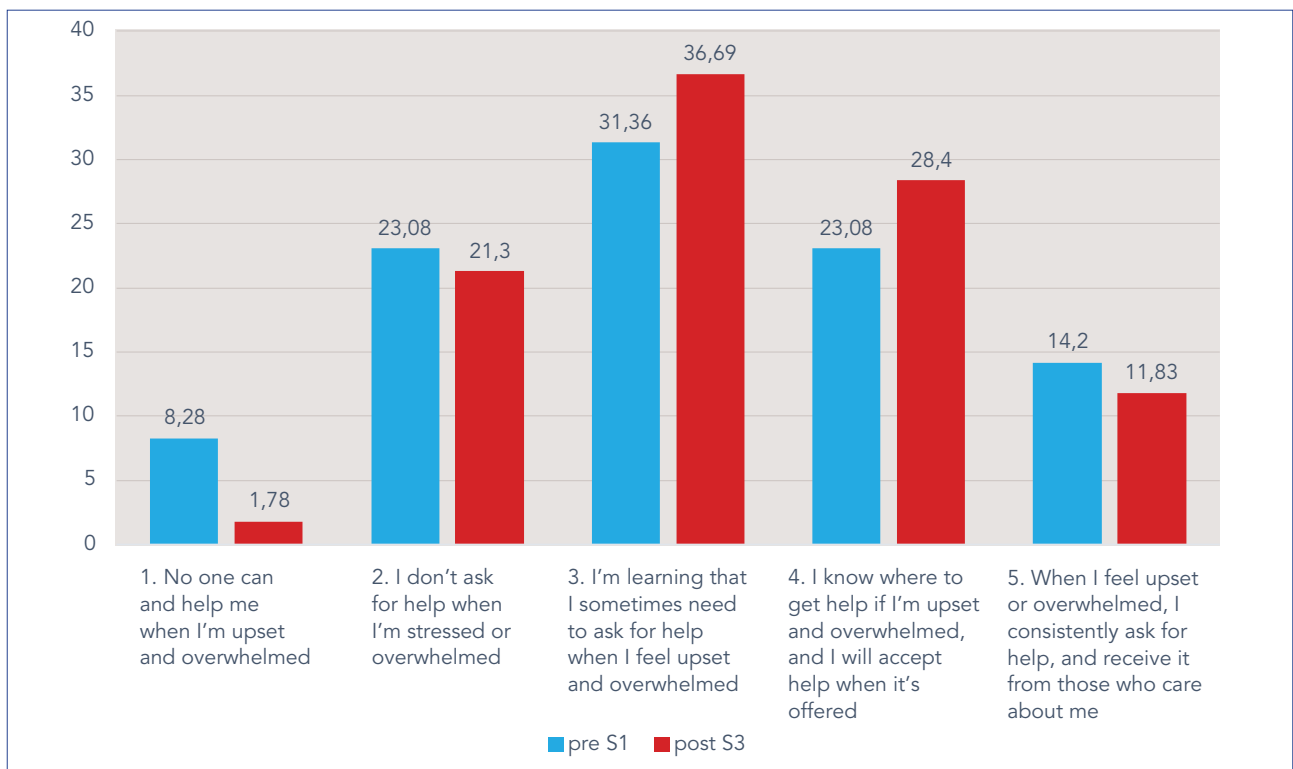
T-test: p = 0.1517

The accounts provided by beneficiaries in the qualitative interviews again corroborated the ability of the coaching process to positively shift young people's emotional well-being and their understanding of how better to deal with stress and negative emotion. Youth expressed an enhanced belief in their ability to cope, their resilience and their engagement with others, as they connected to a BPS coaching journey:

> *"I was always running away from challenges so when I faced them, that's when I became aware that in life you have to face challenges in order to be stronger. [...] It has shifted a lot of fear anxiety. At first, I was [...] anxious about everything. Going to varsity- I was anxious"* (NEET Female, Round 1 individual interview participant, Orange Farm)

"Also, rejection is part of life and I have accepted that, so it doesn't hurt as much because the way to success passes through that bridge. I will continue to try until I get something. Even when I'm not okay I will come to BPS and maybe talk to someone." (Male youth accepted to study further, Cato Manor Round 1)

"BPS was the place a recovery and at the end of the day when it said and done, I'm gonna achieve what I want so thank you to BPS". (NEET Male, individual interview participant, Round 1, Atlantis)

The above measures and quotes indicate that learning the adaptive skills necessary to support agency, which we consider to align with navigational capacity, took some time to develop, particularly in a context where young people had tried many things and felt as if they had failed (as evidenced by the qualitative data). These experiences of "failure" undermined their sense of agency and trust in themselves. What we may, therefore, be seeing in the data is that young people were slowly building or rebuilding those skills with their coaches, suggesting that even if they do connect to an opportunity, the ongoing support of coaches may be critical to sustain that skills development.

Finally, we look at whether we found changes in the ways in which youth felt about the services in their community.
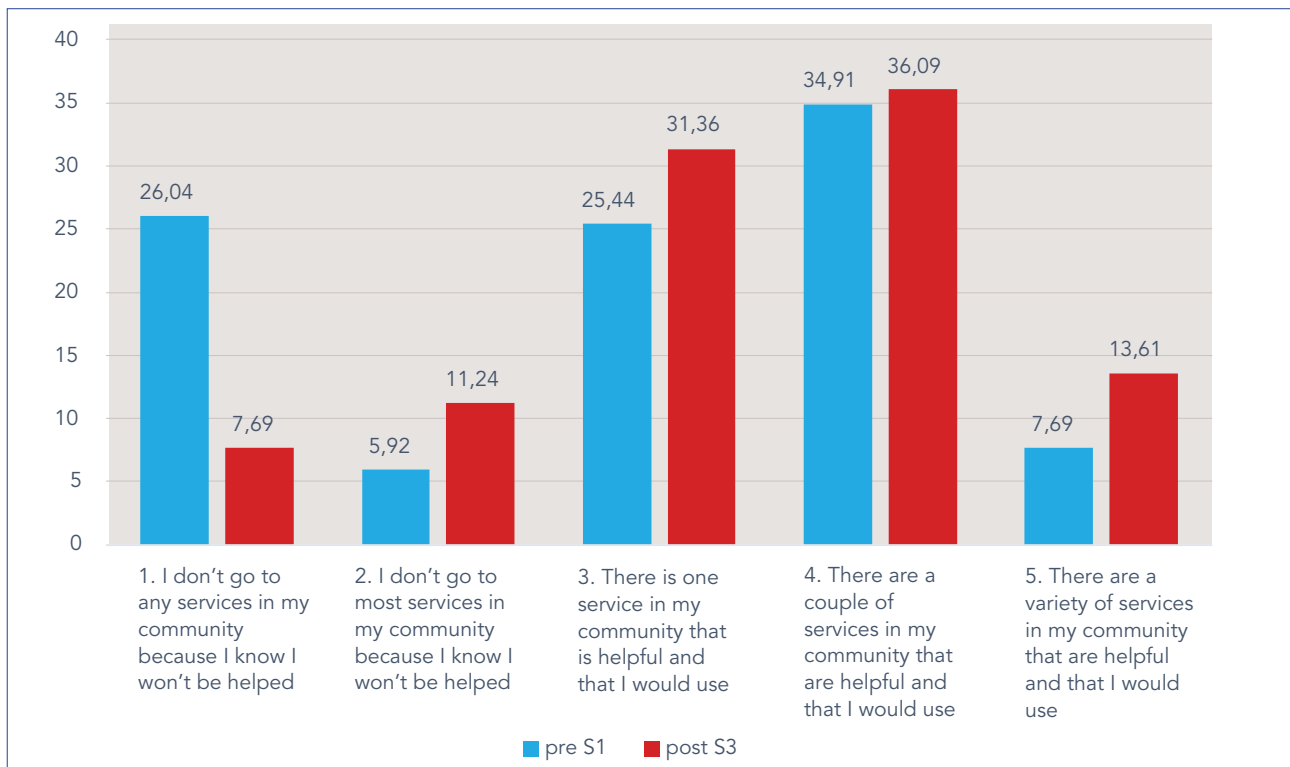
Knowledge of, and access to services

In line with the relatively large numbers of youth not asking help, over a quarter of young people entering the programme felt there were no services they could access in their community, and a further quarter indicate that they only knew of one helpful service, as seen in Figure 14. Importantly, all of the BPS sites are located in areas where there is definitely more than one service available for youth, ranging from government provided services such as Department of Social Development, Clinics, walk in points of the Department of Employment and Labour, etc. In addition, several non-governmental services exist (Youth Explorer, 2024). The numbers are indicative of the weak social networks among many young people in South Africa, and corroborate earlier BPS scoping work (De Lannoy et al., 2019).

However, Figure 14 reveals consistent, and highly statistically significant, improvement in young people accessing services and resources in their community. This finding may be explained by either a lack of awareness about services or a feeling that services would not help them, prior to joining to BPS. The programme is designed to address both of these possible scenarios through an active referral process in the coaching programme, where participants are made aware of relevant services and guided about how to access these services; and through working with local service providers in a community of practice to improve service delivery to youth.

We see in Figure 14, an 18.35 percentage point drop in the proportion of youth who indicated not accessing any services in their community as they knew they would not be helped. This drop was coupled with a nearly 6 percentage point increase in youth who accessed a variety of helpful resources and services.

Figure 14: Do you access services and resources in your community

Figure 14: Do you access services and resources in your community

	1. I don't go to any services in my community because I know I won't be helped	2. I don't go to most services in my community because I know I won't be helped	3. There is one service in my community that is helpful and that I would use	4. There are a couple of services in my community that are helpful and that I would use	5. There are a variety of services in my community that are helpful and that I would use
pre S1	26,04	5,92	25,44	34,91	7,69
post S3	7,69	11,24	31,36	36,09	13,61

T-test: p = 0.0000

In the qualitative interviews, young people detailed the practical ways in which the BPS had helped them understand what services and opportunities were available to them, but also what was needed to *access* these services and resources. While the quantitative data at baseline reflected the sense of disconnect and distrust in local service providers, the qualitative narratives spoke to how information provided on "where to go and what to take along", built young people's sense of agency and increased their self-confidence and self-efficacy:

> *[...] I told everyone that if you take me six months back and someone who didn't do the BPS programme and you put us together and you tell us both 'okay there's a opportunity at the university, you need to go, this is the time and everything', I would be more skilled than the person who wasn't here [in BPS] because that person, because most of the people I know, they asked me 'what do you need to take to college, how many proof of address, what time, what bus, how do I apply for certain things'. [...] I also was that kid who didn't know what to take and all the documents but now I know all the documents and that for me is, that is a basic support package [laughter] because now I am packed with things that can help me further. I can go to um um um a university, I know the opening days and how an opening day works, and all these little things now I'm packed with it.*
> (NEET youth, male, individual interview Atlantis)

*When I got to this program, it became much easier because anything we needed would be posted on the group including learnerships. **My main struggle was applications; for example, if there was a post, I was not able to apply on my own because I didn't know what's needed**.*" (Male NEET youth, Cato Manor Round 1)

*I was amazed, **I was like wow, because I never knew what opportunities there were in Atlantis*** (NEET female, 21, individual interview, Round 2, Atlantis)

*You come and it's almost like they take your hand and that's how my experience was to get from this point to the next. That's when I was like okay **if I for instance if I want to apply now for my license, I know this is where I need to go and get the training I need**".* (NEET Male, individual interview participant, Round 1, Atlantis)

In sum, we saw substantial improvements in most of the indicators used to measure outcomes 1 and 2. The quantitative findings of youth having better mental health, feeling more supported, and being more resilient were strongly supported by the qualitative data gathered across the different sites. These data also provided important context and details about how the various aspects of the programme contributed to the range of well-being improvements. At this relatively early stage of the programme, it was encouraging to see that the foundational outcomes of the Theory of Change were indeed being observed.

Outcome 3: Youth connect to learning and earning opportunities

One of the ultimate outcomes of the BPS Theory of Change was a shift in the NEET status of beneficiaries from not being in employment, education or training (NEET) to being engaged in employment, education or training (EET). We refer to this as the "NEET to EET" transition.

This analysis used a different set of data and therefore a different sample from the previous analyses presented. Given that one of the eligibility criteria for the programme was that a young person was not in employment, education or training, we assumed that 100% of youth who enrolled as a BPS beneficiary were NEET prior to session 1. The NEET status of BPS beneficiaries was then assessed at four key stages of the BPS programme: post session 1; post session 2; post session 3; and post session 4. The sample for each data collection point depended on the number of beneficiaries who had completed that programme stage. The period over which the four coaching sessions were completed differed for each individual as they worked through the programme at their own pace. This analysis should thus be considered an investigation of various key moments of the BPS programme journey rather than one of specific time periods.

A most encouraging finding was the decrease in the proportion of NEET youth across the various data collection periods, as seen in Figure 15. Following their first session, 88.39% of youth were NEET. This figure decreased steadily to the lowest proportion of 64.37% following Session 4. The difference between the NEET rate post-S1 and post-S4 was highly statistically significant (p=0.0000).

Figure 15: Proportion of NEET youth post sessions 1, 2, 3 & 4
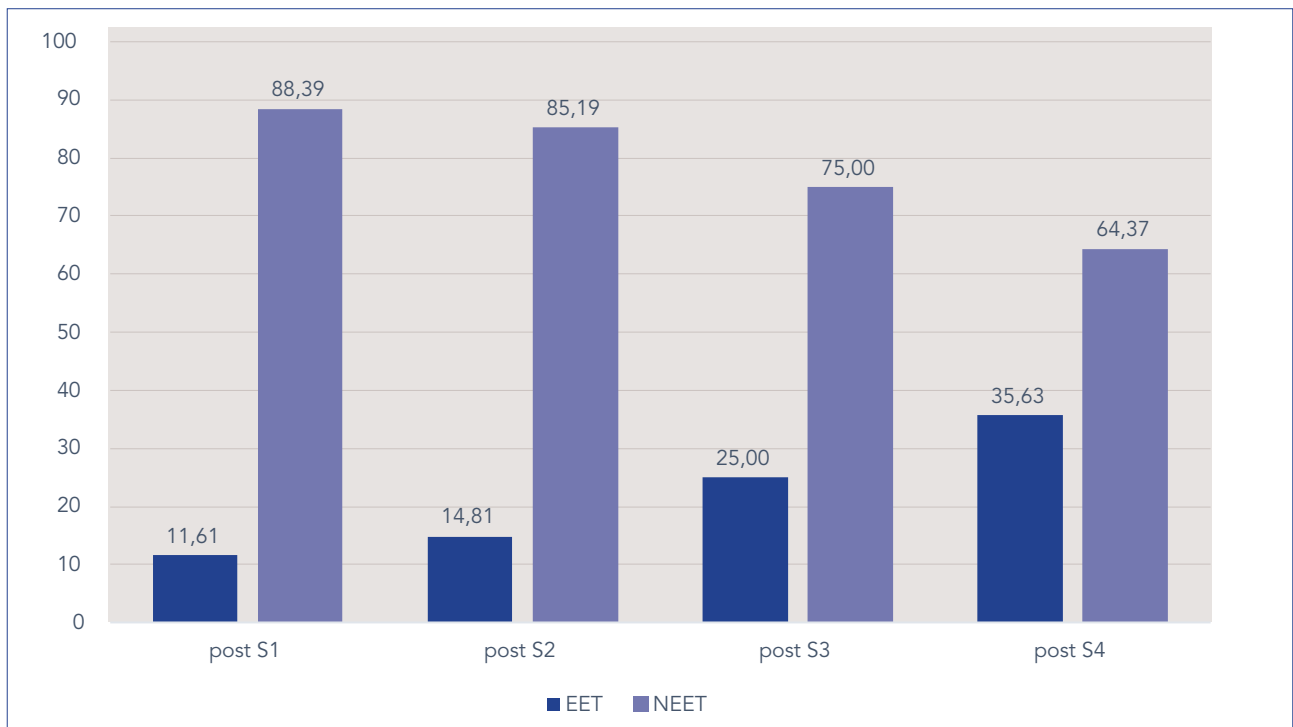
T-test (post S1 and post S4): p = 0.0000

The qualitative narratives too reflected encouraging NEET to EET transitions, also demonstrating the coaches' ability to solve both for the often immediate need to earn an income and for the longer term need to remain focused on a training trajectory that would bring young people closer to their aspired futures:

> *"I did my N1 and N2. […] [But my brother] the breadwinner in my house moved […] And there was no more breadwinner. My mother was determined for me to go on and finish my N but then […] I didn't want to go on because my family was struggling and I have the ability to provide for them. So, I didn't know what to do. […][my coach], asked me 'can you get a weekend job?' and I'm like 'Why didn't I think of that? […] if I can get the weekend job, I can pay for my traveling […] because when my brother left, we didn't have money to pay for my traveling, and it was quite expensive […]* **But now I am convinced [that I must also continue studying] because […when we drew up my action plan], I looked and yoh: if I stop, I cannot go further, so I need to go.** *So, the next thing was 'OK, we're gonna get that weekend job'. [The team helped me apply] and just a few weeks into college, I got a phone call [and then I got the job]."* (NEET Male, individual interview, Atlantis)

Additional narratives provided insight into some of the challenges young people encountered in learning and earning spaces and how these could easily lead to youth dropping out of these opportunities. The ability of young people to continue to consult the BPS team and support even after they took up opportunities proved to be a protective factor against such drop-out:

> *"There was a time where our Admin [of the training programme] discouraged me and said I should quit the programme. I was really helpless and discouraged but **my coach was there to help me see the reason why I was here in the first place and get me to focus,** and helped me with who to go to when I have those kinds of problems."* (BPS beneficiary, Orange Farm)

> *"When I started my training, I got sexually harassed by a colleague and it made things difficult for me. But thanks to my coach I found ways to deal with it. At some point, I wanted to quit the programme because of all the judgement and comments that my colleagues were making but my coach didn't let me. **She helped me deal with all the negativity and supported with every decision I made.** I'm really grateful to BPS because if it wasn't for them, **I would have quit the programme and stayed at home."** (BPS beneficiary, Orange Farm)

A small set of interviews conducted with opportunity holders similarly indicated that BPS beneficiaries who accessed opportunities were not only a "good fit" for that opportunity - as youth had a better sense of what the opportunity entailed, prior to starting - but also that the ongoing support from BPS ensured higher completion rates – thus reducing the loss of investment on both the side of the young person and the opportunity holder:

> *"BPS was key in ensuring that suitable trainees were attracted and ultimately enrolled into the programme. This was further complimented through constant coaching sessions with the BPS team where learners were provided with holistic support, emotionally, socially as well as psychologically. This resulted in retaining almost all 20 learners with the exception of the 3 who got employment opportunities. This has been one of the sustainability elements that the City and possibly other Skills Training Centres have been grappling to get right."* (Learnership provider in Orange Farm)

While the final outcome of transitioning youth from NEET to EET is a longer-term goal of the programme, best assessed over a lengthier time period, the current data showed a significant shift from NEET to EET as youth progressed through just three to four coaching sessions. Further analysis revealed that there was some movement back into NEET-hood once a young person had transitioned to EET. At this stage, it is unclear why EET youth have returned to being NEET. A possible explanation is that several youths took up a temporary or short-term working or education opportunity. They might have taken up a short-term opportunity while waiting to gain access to post-school education, or they may have needed support to reconnect to another opportunity. This finding was in line with our expectations, but the length of the pilot stage did not allow us to collect additional data to investigate this aspect further. At the time of writing, revision of data instruments and collection methods was underway to inform a longer-term tracer study of BPS beneficiaries to determine the longer-term outcomes in youths' journey from NEET to EET.

5 CONCLUSION AND NEXT STEPS

The Basic Package of Support is an activation and support intervention, aimed at reconnecting young people who are Not in Employment, Education, or Training, to services and opportunities that could place them onto trajectories towards sustainable livelihoods. Its design is based on the understanding that youth who are NEET face multiple types of barriers to re-enter the education system and/or the labour market and therefore require multi-faceted support that fits their particular profile and local context. The support provided by BPS, therefore, includes a coaching journey that involves, among others, the development of individualised action plans, referral to relevant services and opportunities and peer-to-peer support. While the programme would ultimately want to see more young people connect to education and income-earning opportunities, it is built on the assumption that some youth who are NEET may require a longer period of support and guidance to bring them closer to the labour market. The support, therefore, may include referral to psycho-social, grant, nutrition or childcare services – to name but a few.

The first round of data collected as part of the BPS pilot phase confirmed, firstly, significant levels of emotional vulnerability among the young people who "walk through the door" of a BPS site – even if they do not appear to be the most vulnerable in terms of levels of education, home and financial insecurity. No less than 83% of those who completed the pre-session 1 survey presented as "struggling" in the Gallup Life Evaluation Well-being index; almost 40% showed as possibly suffering Generalised Anxiety Disorder; almost 18% presented with high psychological distress, with an additional 65% showing moderate psychological distress; over 30% indicated no or very low access to family or adult support, and over 30% indicated not accessing any, or at most one, service in their community. The figures indicate isolation and distress among significant numbers of these youth. As these young people have chosen to engage with BPS, and therefore show a level of initiative, we can assume that other youth may be feeling even more isolated.

However, the data also show the significant shifts in well-being that occurred among youth as they completed just three of the BPS pre-determined coaching sessions. The results are testimony to the potential of a well-targeted, but agile intervention to break the cycle of social drift that occurs when youth remain excluded from socio-economic opportunities. We saw positive changes in all emotional well-being indicators, and observed a movement away from being NEET to taking up training and work opportunities. In other words, we saw improvements in the three key outcomes we examined for this pilot phase:

1. Youth felt supported, were more resilient, and had better mental health outcomes pre-session 1 to post-session 3;

2. NEET youth showed increased navigational capacities;

3. Youth connected to learning and earning opportunities.

Importantly, larger numbers of these young people connected to training or education opportunities than to job opportunities. In the context of low labour market absorption and the continued mismatch between the skills with which many youth leave the schooling system, and the required skills in a difficult labour market

environment, this kind of shift is in fact what we would assume to see and that should, in the longer term, become one of the levers for labour market access or even self-employment. Unfortunately, the current data collection approach does not allow for continued follow up of the participants, leaving a gap in our understanding of the longer-term engagement with BPS as a programme and of the longer-term effects of this engagement.

This aspect is but one of the numerous areas of the BPS programme that require further exploration going forward. The pilot phase of the BPS also set out to test a number of things in addition to the primary outcomes. One of these factors was testing various measures of well-being and vulnerability: how well these measures performed in the field, and how well aligned they were in terms of diagnosing mental health issues. In this paper, we briefly presented each measure and the outcome, but did not discuss the wider implications for the measurement of youth well-being in an intervention setting. This extensive piece of work will be covered in detail in a forthcoming paper.

The outcomes will also be assessed in greater detail, specifically looking at the differences across the three core pilot sites. The context and implementation setting are of vital importance in assessing the effectiveness of the programme. Differences between sub-populations of youth will be explored, such as gender, education level, and smaller age cohorts. A further investigation will also be conducted into the different types, and intensity, of coaching provided to different profiles of young people in order to see significant and lasting change in their well-being, and ultimately NEET-hood. A newly approved Tracer Study grant will allow us to revise data collection tools and moments, tracking BPS beneficiaries and their outcomes over more extended periods of time.

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