




PILOT PROJECT 2022 FINAL REPORT AND EVALUATION  
YOUTH WORK COMMUNITY OF PRACTICE

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## Introduction

This evaluation report builds on the interim report of September 2022, bringing additional data and information from surveys, interviews, and a focus group with resource-support people.

Elements of this evaluation report include:

1. Design of the Community of Practice (CoP) and comments on how it was able to meet the needs of workers
2. Strengths and weaknesses of this model – how it met/didn't meet worker needs
3. Enrolment and retention
4. The level of change in practice as reported by participants
5. Proposed priority issues for any future CoP
6. The sustainability of this type of model to support the professional development of people working with vulnerable young people

## Design of the CoP

The design was a two-step process. Step one consisted of five core group members<sup>1</sup> designing the initial concept, publicity approach and Workshop #1. Step two consisted of participants in Workshop #1 co-designing the rest of the program, while also allowing a participatory and emergent process.

Step #1 agreed on the following design elements (see below for expansion on each of these):

- 1.1 The initiative would be focused by an action research question
- 1.2 The initiative would not be a course, but a community of practice (CoP)
- 1.3 We would use a particular pedagogy (dialogic and emergent) and practice (guided by the spiral model<sup>2</sup>)
- 1.4 The CoP would focus on youth work practice
- 1.5 Specific workshop content and dialogues<sup>3</sup>
- 1.6 Resources

Step #2 – as a co-design process in workshop 1 all participants agreed to:

- Adjust the action research question
- The content of each workshop as the CoP consolidated
- The resources we wanted to create along the way

### 1.1 Action research question

The core group designed the initial action research question as:

*What will it take to ethically and effectively engage with highly marginalised/vulnerable young people?*

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<sup>1</sup> Members included Siyavash Doostkhah from YANQ, Dr Jenny Kaighan from QUT, Neta-Rie Mabo & Phil Dodds from Sisters Inside and Dr Peter Westoby from Community Praxis Co-op/Deakin Uni

<sup>2</sup> See page 4 for spiral model picture and explanation

<sup>3</sup> See <https://www.communityyouthwork.org/our-learning-program> for whole program

Through participant discussion over several sessions this shifted to:

*What will it take to work ethically and effectively with young people in Child Protection and Youth Justice systems?*

It should be noted that the purpose of this action research question was to provide focus and to cultivate an attitude of on-going and intentional curiosity and questioning. As such, the curiosity and on-going questioning inspired improved practice based on reflection/analysis and experience.

There was also discussion about what action research consists of. The CoP used Bob Dick's web site as a resource<sup>4</sup>.

### 1.2 Community of Practice (CoP)

As a Community of Practice there was acknowledgment that while the five core members would take responsibility for 'holding space', all participants would share responsibility for the quality of community through participating in co-design, dialogue quality, and bringing their experiences, questions and expertise to the community group.

As such, while advertised as a Community of Practice<sup>5</sup> - and with most feedback being very positive about the emergent co-design process, a few participants grappled with the idea and expressed some dissatisfaction. These participants appeared to prefer a more orthodox 'course' pre-designed with an expert-led transfer of ideas and information.

In workshop #1 we explained that a CoP consists of:

- Clear focus on a shared problem of practice
- Active learning through process of inquiry
- Collective ownership
- Appropriate mix of partners
- Sufficient commitment to support implementation
- An effective structure of governance and decision making.<sup>6</sup>

Later workshops considered the difficulties particularly in relation to the last two points, with a lack of clarity about how the CoP could influence policy and practice within the organisations participants were employed. In this sense the CoP was unable to make systemic changes within employer organisations.

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<sup>4</sup> FAQ about Action Research on Bob Dick's website: [http://www.aral.com.au/resources/arfaq.html#a\\_faq\\_1](http://www.aral.com.au/resources/arfaq.html#a_faq_1)  
Access to articles on Action Research on Bob Dick's website <http://www.aral.com.au/>

<sup>5</sup> This was the text used in publicity:

*If you work with young people in Youth Justice or Residential Care in South-East Qld, you may be eligible for a \$5,000 scholarship to join a Community of Practice and explore practice frameworks that help improve ethical and effective youth work provision. For further information about this exciting opportunity and how you can apply see the flyer below*

<sup>6</sup> See link for more information <https://learningforward.org/journal/december-2016-issue/6-key-features-of-a-successful-community-of-practice/>

### 1.3 Pedagogy and Practice

Aligned with the CoP philosophy the initiative was designed as:

- i. Dialogic: meaning that we would avoid 'experts' teaching 'participants' and instead recognise that all participants came with expertise, but that there would be a few 'resource people' (the core group from YANQ, Sisters Inside, QUT and Community Praxis Co-op)
- ii. Guided by the spiral model<sup>7</sup>. This model starts with either participants experience's around an issue/concern or a 'code' (a video/case study/picture/poem) as a stimulus for dialogue.

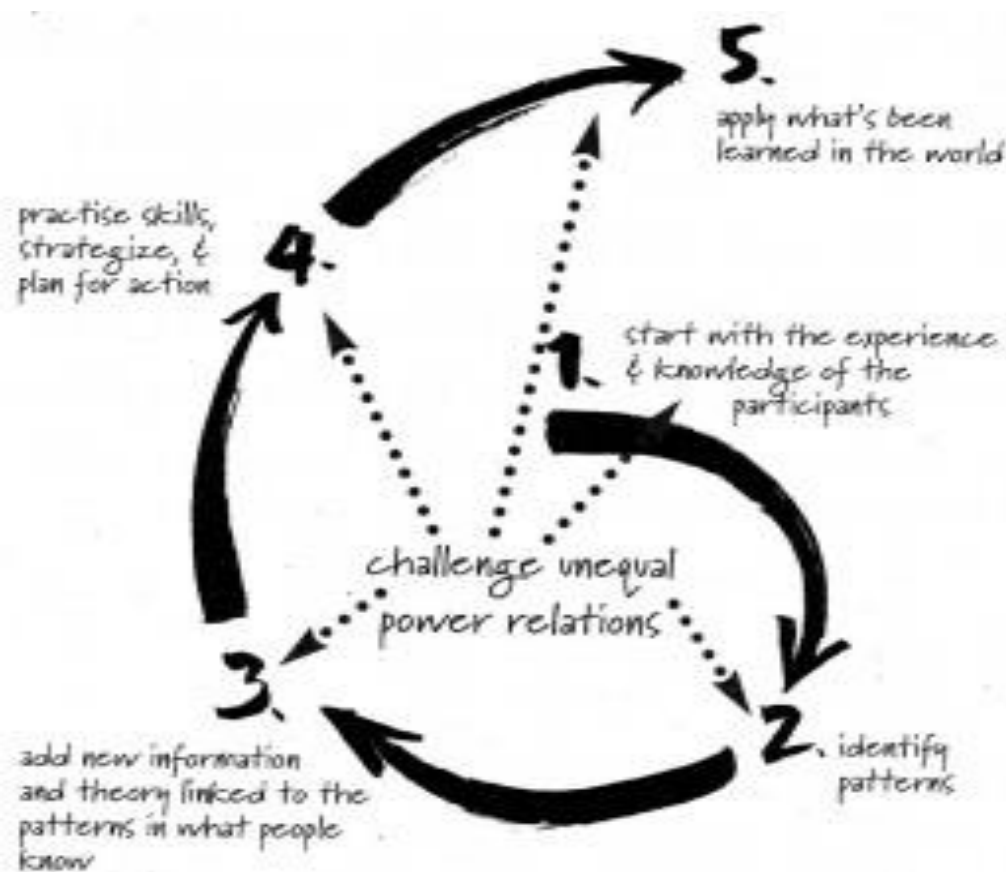


Figure 1 Spiral model

### 1.4 Youth work practice

Participants acknowledged the educational context of Peakcare's 'Hope and Healing' training<sup>8</sup> – mandatory for all foster carers and workers in residential care. However, participants wanted the CoP to contextualise such content within the tradition of youth work practice. More about this will be discussed below.

<sup>7</sup> See link for more information on the Spiral Model

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<sup>8</sup> <https://peakcare.org.au/hopehealing/>

## 1.5 Workshop contents

What was covered in workshops:

Workshop #1: 21<sup>st</sup> March, 9am-12pm

- Meeting one another; sharing workplace/aspirations for the CoP
- Exploring what a CoP means for us
- Initial conversation on action research and the draft question
- Explanation of the dialogical nature of our emergent curriculum design and the spiral model as a pedagogical guide

Workshop #2: 11<sup>th</sup> April, 1-4pm:

- Drawing on Dr Shawn Ginwright's presentation on Healing Centered Engagement<sup>9</sup> there was a discussion on therapeutic vs social/ecological models of trauma
- There was a discussion about 'practice' (e.g. youth work practice) and the importance of knowing 'intention' (knowing intention means people know their practice). In contrast people can know a lot of techniques, but not have a practice
- Clarification about the action research question – discussions on meaning of ethical, effective and vulnerable – which led to a change in the question

Workshop #3: 9<sup>th</sup> May, 1-4pm

- Further reflections on the intention of youth work
- The criminalisation of young people in resi-care – people's experiences and what could be done
- The challenge of how people in organisations see youth work as 'baby-sitting' – and managers say things like 'we have no idea what you do'
- The challenge of ethical youth work sometimes requiring 'breaking of the rules' made by organisations who don't really understand the ethical basis of youth work
- The lack of regular supervision available to youth worker in this resi-space
- Making sense of how managerialism has impacted and shaped contemporary youth work

Workshop #4: 13<sup>th</sup> June, 1-4pm

- Participants shared stories of an ethical and effective piece of youth work – then explored commonalities
- Which led to rich conversations on professionalism
- Focus on challenges of ethical and effective youth work in context of existing organisations people work for – and contrasted this with Sisters Inside organisational practice framework, which supports ethical and effective youth

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<sup>9</sup> See link for more information [https://youthrex.com/video/from-trauma-informed-care-to-healing-centered-engagement-a-youth-work-teach-in-with-dr-shawn-ginwright/?post\\_type=library-post&p=9325](https://youthrex.com/video/from-trauma-informed-care-to-healing-centered-engagement-a-youth-work-teach-in-with-dr-shawn-ginwright/?post_type=library-post&p=9325)

work. This led to questions of what are options when frameworks are not aligned?

#### Workshop #5: 12<sup>th</sup> September, 1-4pm

- Sharing young people's views on what is ethical and effective youth work and what is not
- Feedback on website
- Discussion on the value of compulsory training ie (Peak Care Hope and Healing training)
- Discussion on the value of organising one-on-one coaching for workers
- Discussion on how the CoP can continue on.

Workshop #6: Final session planned for October 17<sup>th</sup>, 2-5pm + celebration dinner.

*Note, workshops planned for July and August were cancelled due to peak COVID winter wave which meant that several people were sick during each scheduled time.*

#### 1.6 Resource development

Recognising the dialogical and emergent nature of the workshops and discussions the CoP decided it would like to develop a documented resource of discussions and other content drawn on. The CoP decided to do this via the development of a web site. The web site<sup>10</sup> included:

- An archive of content drawn on in workshops (video's, documents, discussion questions)
- A podcast in-progress which foreground the voices of young people – an agreement of participants in the CoP<sup>11</sup>
- Articles to read

### Some tensions that emerged in this model

#### 2.1 Tension #1: Orthodox course vs. Community of Practice

As mentioned above, despite the publicity being clear this was a CoP model and participant discussion about this in workshop #1, some participants struggled with the emergent process. For example, two participants shared how:

*On the publicity the scholarship said it would be training but it feels more like a yarnning circle – and perhaps this isn't so easy for some; as such it feels more like reflection, not training*

*I'm more factual and I'm used to hearing facts and it's challenging for me to be in a more story-telling and reflective space. When I return to work and people say, 'what did you learn?', I find it hard to say*

However, others loved the CoP model and one shared how:

*Most orthodox education is very teacher lead, very 'these are the facts and regurgitate'. Whereas this process allowed me to think deeply and reflect on my own practice and the how and why I do what I do. I don't necessarily know a new skill, but I have a new way of thinking about things; a different lens. Eg. The exercise about thinking about the intention*

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<sup>10</sup> <https://www.communityyouthwork.org/>

<sup>11</sup> <https://spotifyanchor-web.app.link/e/L3mh8VNPTvb>

Positive feedback on this approach included:

*I love the open dialogue and the quality of listening*

*The material leads to rich discussions*

*I love the emergent curriculum – but also like that we know the topic for the next session (as we design it together)*

*Dialogue is really about ‘turning up’ and really listening*

*This is the first time I have had things to really think about*

One person shared how:

*I loved the robust discussion and sharing of experiences. I always enjoyed Jen’s and Siyavash’s input and they often challenged me to think in different ways or see things from another point of view*

And another shared how:

*I enjoyed the guided reflective questions which made me think deeply about my own practice, and I enjoyed meeting others from the sector and hearing stories of their best practice. I also enjoyed the resources the facilitators shared*

As such this sharing and dialogic approach worked well for a number of people.

## 2.2 Tension #2: Face-to-face vs. online:

In workshop #1 (held Face-to-Face) participants agreed they wanted to continue face-to-face. There was recognition that embodied dialogues were crucial. However, this proved to be difficult over time. A combination of issues made maintaining in person sessions difficult and contributed to retention issues. These included:

- distance for some (travel from places such as Gold Coast and Sunshine Coast),
- the convenience of on-line,
- workplaces not allowing participants to use paid-time to participate
- the nature of workplace rostering which did not allow participants to plan in advance
- illness/including COVID

## 2.3 Tension #3: Focus on the youth worker vs. focus on the industry

While the CoP focused on the role of youth work and the youth worker’s practice, an emergent analysis by all present was the ‘problem of the youth work industry’ – and particularly the organisations employing youth workers. By workshop #3 a growing analysis of managerialism informed the conversation about the limits of youth worker training per se. However this evaluation acknowledges that *some* organisations did support their employees to attend the course.

Also of note participants asked YANQ to organise a letter from the Department of Children, Youth Justice and Multicultural Affairs recommending the CoP. This indicated that organisations are responding more favourably to training opportunities recommended by



the Department of Children, Youth Justice and Multicultural Affairs rather than chosen by youth workers.

## Enrolment and retention

### 3.1 Enrolment

Twelve workers voluntarily chose to participate in the course. Some reasons given for enrolling (elicited in workshop #1) included:

- *To learn more about youth work as a profession and be exposed to other people in the industry and learn from their experiences and insights*
- *At my workplace I'm the most experienced, yet I know very little – and I want to bring change*
- *I joined the community of practice as I have worked in youth work (both residential and now foster care) for 7 years now, and I feel there is a lot that needs to change to help improve the system and outcomes for our young people in out of home care system. I felt this may be a good opportunity and forum to start having those important change driven conversations with likeminded individuals. The ultimate hope was for this to be a driver of change*
- *To share and learn with others engaging with others in the industry working toward better engaging and supporting young people that can be challenging to build positive and meaningful relationships to support growth and change*
- *I chose to join as I seen it as an opportunity to connect with other professionals in my field. There are many issues with the current child protection system, and I aim to help change them. I seen this as a potential first step towards that journey*
- *I dream of somewhere where kids are safe – if this group can help, great. I'm tired of being told, 'you've got to do this – rules', rather than have spaces to discuss practice*
- *I see so many problems in the system and I've been in this 'care system' a while, but want to keep learning*
- *Hope requires a collective brain and I'm here hoping we can bring some political change and also bring some day-to-day change in everyday practice*
- *Hopefully we can develop something that brings change*
- *Not sure what I want – I see a lack of departmental confidence in non-government sector, and yet I'd like a learning space where we can feel and experience confidence*
- *To change things we need to use the expertise available in this group; often I/we feel alone, siloed in our work – and yet 'going alone isn't working', we're lone wolves complaining and howling alone. We need a vehicle for collective change*
- *We seem isolated and alone – we can't bring collective change; and I'm keen to learn from others*
- *I'd like to bring some of my knowledge and experience to this room of people*
- *There are so few opportunities for youth workers to get any mentoring these days; there's few youth work oriented training opportunities available these days*
- *I'm hungry for critical youth work conversations*
- *I have a lot to share – and I'm willing to learn and bring my knowledge and practice*
- *I was curious to understand how the practice was playing out*

Some key themes emerge from this evaluation data, including:

- A significant motivation to learn
- The desire for reflection on practice
- The necessity of moving from rules-based work to reflective-based youth work practice
- Wanting to learn in a group – in a dialogic way
- The hope for change – recognising individual youth workers can only do so much
- The acknowledgment of expertise, and the desire to access it (see our framework of types of expertise in Part 5)
- A willingness to share knowledge and expertise with others

- The identification of gaps for mentoring, learning and sharing

### 3.2 Retention

A core group stayed throughout the program and some dropped away.

- Workshop #2 included 10 participants
- Workshop #3 included 8 participants
- Workshop #4 included 8 participants

Several reasons for participants dropping out included:

- Someone not feeling they had much to offer the group
- A couple preferring a more orthodox 'training' program taught by experts
- Distance to travel (travel from places such as Gold Coast and Sunshine Coast)
- The inconvenience of face-to-face
- Workplaces not allowing to use paid-time to participate, costing people time/money
- Workplaces rostering workers at short notice making participation hard to plan over longer periods of time
- Illness/including COVID
- And finally, one person shared how they didn't really feel others had come to 'learn' but were there to perform their expertise. They didn't therefore feel 'safe' in the sense of it being a safe stretching learning space. This person's departure led to significant reflection among the facilitator and resource team

## The level of change in practice as reported by participants

Different types of change that were reported can be categorised in the following ways:

### 4.1 New ways of learning

Participants reported a greater appreciation of dialogue and reflective ways of learning – in contrast to more traditional didactic approaches (expert lectures etc).

### 4.2 New motivation to learn

Participating in a CoP enhanced people's motivation to learn. Participants reported that exposure to the knowledge and expertise of practitioners and resource-people helped increase motivation. As one person shared: *'You suddenly know what you don't know, which makes you more curious'*

### 4.3 The importance of critical youth work theory

Some participants enjoyed exposure to critical youth work theory – not to 'tell' workers what to do/how to practice, but as a way of reflecting on their practice carefully and critically.

This helped participants also think more broadly, not only about their practice but their practice-in-context – that is, the youth work industry, managerialism, policy and so forth.

### 4.4 New ideas and theories about youth work

Most participants enjoyed the way new ideas and theories were introduced into the workshops (as per step #3 of the spiral model) - building on people's stories, helping people

make sense of their experiences. Examples of such theory includes socio-ecological models of trauma, managerialism, youth work theory, theories of practice (e.g. 'to have a practice is to know your intention in practice').

There was recognition that with no Queensland based universities offering a stand-alone Youth Work course and majority of youth workers coming through TAFE, there is a great need to expose youth workers to youth work and other relevant theories.

#### 4.5 Ripple effects of taking learning into organisations

There were some exciting moments in the CoP where participants shared their experiences of taking learnings back into their organisation. Sometimes these were formal – for example, report backs and informational sharing in team meetings at workplaces. Other times these were informal as participants shared how they had conversations with work colleagues about what they were learning in the CoP.

For example, one participant shared how they -

*... took my learnings and reflections and shared them within our youth work team, including managers, and have valued the conversations and reflections which have come from that. I highly valued being able to share what I learnt with my workplace and to see them also beginning to reflect on how things are done and how we perceive things.*

#### 4.6 The level of action research question

While participants did not report a significant level of change due to the action research question, reflections overall suggested the question did ensure a focus for the CoP. This occurred in a two-fold way – first in terms of what ethical and effective youth work can be; and second in terms of the links between residential care and criminalisation of young people. While the resource/facilitation team was clear that the intention was not so much to answer the action research question, but to keep us focused, one participant suggested:

*I don't think we answered this question. I think there are way too many systemic barriers for us to answer this. The system needs a complete overhaul and we can't come up with that in such a short time frame.*

This quote links to Tension #3 identified earlier – with a growing awareness among participants that the focus cannot just be on effective/ethical youth work but needs to expand to youth-work-in-context – particularly the organisational and policy context.

Reiterating this perspective, another person shared how:

*I can't confidently say it did [referring to the action research question]. I can say it helped me reflect on my own best practice. But when there are such huge multisystemic systemic issues that also need to be addressed, I am not confident what I gained will make any changes. There may be a ripple effect, such as improved practice with the young people I personally support, and ongoing conversations with my team, and perhaps it will help our facilitators think about things differently or focus on what directions need to happen next. But we still have to work in systems which can feel like it's against us and the families and young people we support.*

## Proposed priority issues for any future CoP

The resource group/facilitator reflections included the following specific recommendations for a future CoP:

### 5.1 Pre-CoP (promotion and design)

- Integrate a promotional strategy in the CoP where employers are provided with detailed information about all aspects of the CoP and the potential benefits to their workers and workplace
- YANQ to continue working with Peakcare to ensure the CoP and the Hope and Healing training complement one another and are promoted to the sector by both peak bodies
- Further integrating the voices of young people in the design and planning of future CoP initiatives
- Focus on a mix of face-to-face and online gatherings to ensure CoP has relevance and that it can be delivered across various parts of the state

### 5.2 Evolving the program

- Start the CoP with a values clarity exercise – so participants can see where each person is coming from
- Recognise and talk with participants about the tension within emergent design between flexibility and structure and explore how participants feel about these two things. For example, for people who prefer and feel comfortable with structure - and perhaps have only ever experienced a clearly structured learning program - the flexibility of an emergent design, a spiral model guided pedagogy and dialogue would be challenging. Again, to clarify values and preference so facilitators can be more conscious of how participants are experiencing the program, would be helpful
- While still holding to emergent design based on who is 'in the room', a suggestion is to be clear from week to week – such that a participant can be very clear with their manager what topic will be discussed in the upcoming workshop. This will ensure more focus as well as support the possibility of a manager signing off on a worker using paid time to attend the CoP
- As such a suggestion is that the resource team be a bit more prescriptive on the topics the week before (not the whole program pre-determined, but week by week)

### 5.3 Facilitation and pedagogy

- In reflecting on the facilitation of a community of learning – where some people took up lots of space and came across as quite confident in their practice, and yet if they'd listened they'd have realised they could learn – we suggest a more structured way of ensuring people have equal time (for example, more of a passing around of the message stick)
- Also recognising that the CoP argued that 'we are all experts' (which has some truth) reflections indicate that the facilitators needed to be a bit bolder in challenging problematic practices (recognising that such a challenge which might have driven a participant away)

- Reflecting on our learning methodology and pedagogy we suggest a framework of learning in the dialogues that asks the following kinds of questions:
  - What does critical youth work theory say?
  - What did your education say?
  - What does practice wisdom say?
  - What do young people say?
  - What your own professional values suggest?
- This suggestion ensures that learning occurs by taking into account all these different kinds of expertise
- One suggestion is to shift from creating ‘safe and brave’ learning spaces to ‘accountable spaces’. Further iterations of this CoP and course will explore how this is activated such that participants are more aware of *intent and impact* on others in the group by what we say

#### 5.4 Other reflections

- Although an offer of organising one-on one mentoring was not picked up by participants, discussions held at the gathering indicated a need for such a practice. Perhaps an ongoing CoP could be an opportunity for deeper relationships to be established, such that a mentoring arrangement based on trust might evolve.
- There was a lot of interest by the group in Sisters Inside *values and practice framework* (Workshop #4). This indicated that perhaps there needs to be more promotion and facilitation of values clarification at the organisational level.
- When organisation have clearly articulated values, youth workers will have a choice to join an organisation that aligned with their personal values and in this way, they are not challenged on a daily basis for decisions they make in worker with your people. Clearly the worker retention and satisfaction will have major impact on quality of work with young people.
- Ideally the entire staff including managers/supervisors will participate in the CoP so the entire team can grow and develop collectively.
- YANQ should investigate the viability of offering in-house CoP on a fee for service basis (or funded). This will allow work colleagues from the same organisation to collectively participate in a CoP which will not only allow workers to support one another and continue the CoP discussions at work but also allow for a shifting organisational culture

#### 5.6 Suggestions for a second online version

To summarise the points above:

- Be clearer at the start about why we are there
- More time at the beginning in recruitment to ensure people understand CoP instead of expert trainer approach; more time at the beginning to work out what a CoP is
- We would use the same practices and methodology in an online space
- We would be more prescriptive in topics
- More accountability in intent and impact
- We would use talking/sharing and ‘chat function’ for those not wanting to speak
- We need some more theory, e.g. to have a critical theory base for youth work. This is the knowledge base workers start from – which can then be built on as reflective

practice. As such, there is no such thing as a theory-empty youth work practice. Youth workers confidence in working with young people is significantly enhanced when they can relate their work to critical youth work theory. Without knowledge of critical youth work theory, many youth workers, by default, fall into dominant culture practice frameworks which keeps workers and young people at a distance with young people framed as 'having needs' rather than supporting them in achieving their collective rights.

- There needs to be a focus on youth work foundations – recognising there has been a de-professionalisation of youth work when it's a highly skilled process. The facilitators recognised through the process that they were upskilling participants with new knowledge and helping them and their managers understand effective and ethical youth work, which goes beyond having a youth work diploma

## The sustainability of the model

To make this model sustainable, initial conversations with participants and organisers include ideas such as:

- Make the intention of CoP and reflective practice/emergent curriculum clearer in publicity so people know what they're signing up for
- Integrate attendance into workers jobs, pre-approved by employers (such that people don't lose income through attending)
- Explore how a CoP can be implemented at one workplace with several co-workers
- Offer at workplaces or as part of group supervision
- The group is only just forming as an effective community after five sessions. How to continue?
- Face-to-face is crucial in forming community but is difficult to maintain for the reasons mentioned above
- This model involved intensive participation of resource-people's time (for free), as only two of the five resource-people participated as paid workers. Yet the contributions of the resource-people were crucial to progress dialogues beyond 'any opinion is okay' – i.e. the necessity of experienced youth workers to gently but firmly 'push' new workers to reflect on their practice and/or to ask critical questions
- An ongoing on the job training and upskilling strategy with a focus on equipping workers with youth work skillsets to respond appropriately in complex circumstances
- Piloting a mentoring strategy so novice youth workers can receive timely advice and support from experienced workers on how to deal with complex issue
- Ongoing opportunities for youth workers to network and explore specific topics related to challenges at work and how to share learning
- There was a strong desire for learning indicating that workers don't have much opportunity for on-the-job skills development

## In conclusion

The pilot project was not without its challenges but overall it demonstrated that a CoP is a valuable model that can facilitate growth and development of youth workers with a focus on continued learning and critical analyses. The youth sector across Queensland can significantly benefit by having ongoing access to such reflective opportunities.