

# Fostering Connections, Nurturing Prospects: A Proposed Communities of Practice Plan in Re-engaging Out-of-School Youth

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Date received: September 10, 2024

Date revised: September 30, 2024

Date accepted: October 12, 2024

Originality: 90%

Grammarly Score: 99%

Similarity: 10%

## Recommended citation:

Diez, L., Oris, R., Javier, J., Samson, J., Salvador, M., Fabro, A.M. (2024). Fostering connections, nurturing prospects: A proposed communities of practice plan in re-engaging out-of-school youth. *Journal of Interdisciplinary Perspectives*, 2(11), 324–330. <https://doi.org/10.69569/jip.2024.0503>

**Abstract.** This study investigates the effectiveness of Communities of Practice (CoPs) as a strategy to re-engage out-of-school youth (OSY) in the Philippines. The research, utilizing a qualitative multiple case study approach with three OSY participants from Nagtenga, Sta Cruz, Ilocos Sur, explores themes of belonging, social connections, and prospects. Findings highlight the challenges faced by OSY, including isolation, limited social networks, and uncertain futures. Barriers to CoP participation include accessibility, financial constraints, and balancing commitments. A proposed CoP plan aims to create a supportive environment for OSY to develop skills, build connections, and drive positive change within their communities. This study emphasizes the need for tailored community-driven initiatives to address the unique needs of OSY and promote their successful re-engagement in education and society. Further research is recommended to evaluate the long-term impact of CoPs and develop scalable implementation strategies.

**Keywords:** Communities of practice; Out-of-school youth; Re-engagement; Sense of belonging; Qualitative research.

## 1.0 Introduction

The global pursuit of quality education for all, enshrined in the United Nations' Sustainable Development Goals, faces a persistent challenge: the significant number of out-of-school youth (OSY). In the Philippines, the Philippine Statistics Authority (PSA) Annual Poverty Indicators Survey (Ceballos, 2023) reported that 18.6% of Filipinos aged 5-24 were not enrolled during the 2022-2023 school year. This statistic underscores the multifaceted factors contributing to OSY, including financial constraints, lack of interest in schooling, unfavorable learning environments, and teenage pregnancy (Vito et al., 2018). While the Philippine government has implemented various initiatives to address this issue, such as vocational training programs and the Alternative Learning System (ALS), the prevalence of OSY remains persuasive.

The Alternative Learning System (ALS) was designed to meet the educational requirements of OSY and other underprivileged groups by offering flexible, non-formal education options. According to the Department of

Education (DepEd, 2021), ALS strives to provide education to students who have dropped out of the conventional school system, emphasizing skill development and lifetime learning. However, despite its potential, ALS has experienced problems such as insufficient resources, inadequate facilitator training, and low participation rates, limiting its effectiveness in reaching OSY (Bacani, 2022; DepEd, 2021).

Recent studies show that while ALS has made progress in providing educational possibilities, many OSY needs to be made aware of its programs or encounter challenges to participation, such as financial restrictions and a lack of mobility (Bacani, 2022; Reyes, 2023). The need for innovative and successful initiatives to re-engage OSY is critical. Communities of Practice (CoPs) are a promising strategy that fosters a sense of belonging, promotes information exchange, and facilitates skill development among people who share common interests or challenges (Semertzaki, 2011). Existing research has shown the importance of CoPs in addressing community challenges by using their members' pooled skills and experience (Kontio, 2015). However, there is still a lack of research into how CoP could solve the numerous difficulties OSY encountered in the Philippines.

This study explores the potential of CoPs as a strategy for re-engaging OSY. It delves into the subjective experiences of OSY regarding their sense of belonging, social connections, and perceived future opportunities fostered by the CoP. The study also examines the potential challenges OSY faces in joining CoPs, including accessibility, financial constraints, and balancing commitments. By understanding these experiences and challenges, the study aims to identify specific CoP plans and designs for implementation that can contribute to successful OSY re-engagement. By addressing these barriers and experiences, this research seeks to fill a gap in the literature by providing practical insights and recommendations for implementing CoPs tailored to OSY as a community-driven approach to contribute to their successful engagement and improvement of life outcomes.

## **2.0 Methodology**

### **2.1 Research Design**

This study adopted a qualitative research design to gain a contextual understanding of the experiences and challenges faced by out-of-school youth (OSY) and the effectiveness of Communities of Practice (CoP) in re-engaging them. Specifically, a multiple case study approach was utilized to explore the nuances of using CoPs to re-engage OSY. The multiple case study research design is a qualitative method that enables researchers to investigate complicated phenomena in real-life settings. This approach is very beneficial for establishing plans and treatments, giving rich, detailed information on participants' experiences and issues. Researchers can uncover patterns and variations by evaluating several examples, which can be used to design specific methods (Fletcher, 2017).

In developing a plan for re-engaging out-of-school youth (OSY), a multiple case study design allows researchers to collect diverse perspectives from various individuals, resulting in a more comprehensive understanding of the barriers and facilitators to participation in Communities of Practice. This technique enables the investigation of specific conditions and the identification of common themes that may be used to guide the development of effective treatments. The researchers used a multiple case study approach to examine three OSY members' experiences. This strategy enabled a thorough examination of their sense of belonging, social relationships, and expected future potential inside CoPs. The data from these individual cases were then combined to inform the proposed CoP strategy, ensuring that it met the specific requirements and challenges mentioned by the participants.

### **2.2 Research Participants and Locale**

A purposive sampling technique was employed to select a group of participants. This method was adopted to ensure the participants' experiences and attributes matched the study's aims. The researchers carefully sought out OSYs that fit the inclusion criteria, allowing for a more focused investigation of their experiences and issues with Communities of Practice (CoPs). The study included three out-of-school youth (OSY) participants from Nagtenga, Sta Cruz, and Ilocos Sur, Philippines. The participants were chosen based on specific criteria to ensure they fit the study's focus on OSY, such as (i) age: Participants ranged in age from 15 to 24 years old, (ii) educational status: All participants had not attended any formal schooling and had not graduated from any degree program, and (iii) alternative learning modes: Participants were not enrolled in any Alternative Delivery Mode (ADM), homeschooled, or engaged in distance learning.

The study excluded (i) individuals who were currently enrolled in any formal educational institution, (ii) those who had completed a degree or were graduates, and (iii) participants who were receiving education through alternative modes such as homeschooling or distance learning.

### **2.3 Research Instrument**

A semi-structured interview guide was used to gather qualitative data, and Rapid Assessment and Documentation (RAD) was used to record spontaneous interaction during the interviews. The interview also included open-ended questions and predefined prompts to ensure consistency while allowing participants to elaborate on their thoughts, feelings, and beliefs regarding re-engagement activities. The semi-structured interview guide was created to facilitate in-depth interactions with participants while providing flexibility in responses. This method is ideal for qualitative research because it allows researchers to examine participants' thoughts, feelings, and beliefs in a conversational setting. The guide featured open-ended questions and established prompts, ensuring uniformity throughout the interviews and allowing participants to comment on their experiences.

The interview questions were inspired by existing literature on OSY, CoPs, and related topics. This foundation in established research ensures that the questions are pertinent and can elicit meaningful answers. Before implementation, the interview guide was reviewed by professionals in education, youth engagement, and qualitative research. These experts' feedback helped to improve the questions' clarity, relevancy, and comprehensiveness. The researchers conducted a pilot test with a small sample of volunteers with similar characteristics to the target demographic, who offered feedback on the effectiveness of the questions. Adjustments based on pilot input improve the instrument's validity.

### **2.4 Data Gathering Procedure**

The researchers followed Braun and Clarke's (2006) thematic analysis approach, which included three essential steps: data familiarization, coding, theme formulation, and theme review. Initially, the researchers transcribed the interviews to generate a thorough description of the individuals' stories. This transcribing procedure allowed for a more in-depth engagement with the data, allowing the researchers to find early codes representing key aspects of the participants' experiences.

Following the coding process, the researchers organized the data into broader themes, concentrating on OSY's subjective experiences with their sense of belonging, social relationships, and perceived future opportunities. Rapid Assessment and Documentation (RAD) methodologies enhanced the thematic analysis by providing real-time insights into participant interactions and behaviors during the interviews. This dual technique, which combined thematic analysis with RAD, enabled a more in-depth comprehension of the data by facilitating the replication of findings across several sources, including interviews and observations.

The analysis also highlighted the significance of cross-validating themes to ensure consistency and reliability. By correlating data from numerous sources, the researchers corroborated the formation of themes relevant to OSY's issues, such as accessibility, financial limits, and the need to manage several commitments. This detailed analysis approach not only gave a nuanced knowledge of the complexity underlying OSY's engagement with CoPs but also aided in formulating a specialized operational plan for implementing CoPs in communities. Finally, the analysis functioned as a core component of the study, assisting the researchers in identifying specific requirements and barriers that OSY confronts, thus contributing to the development of practical recommendations for improving their re-engagement in education and society.

### **2.5 Ethical Considerations**

The researchers adhere to ethical considerations throughout the study, ensuring the well-being and rights of all participants. A declaration of no conflicts of interest was made to ensure objectivity. Participants were informed of the study's purpose, procedures, potential risks and benefits, and their right to withdraw. Informed consent was obtained from all participants, with assent secured from those under 18. As part of the RAD process, researchers ensured that participants' natural settings and behavior were not disrupted; this is to keep participant information confidential, with data coded to ensure anonymity and privacy. By integrating RAD and

corroboration per theme, the study maintained a high ethical integrity while maintaining the validity of findings from multiple sources. Thereby strengthening the reliability of the data collected.

### 3.0 Results and Discussion

#### 3.1 Experiences and Challenges of Out-Of-School Youth in Engaging with Communities of Practice as a Re-Engagement Strategy

This section presents the study's results, which explored the experiences and challenges of out-of-school youth (OSY) engaging with Communities of Practice (CoP) as a re-engagement strategy. The findings are organized into three main themes: a sense of belonging, social connections, and perceived future opportunities. Each theme is further divided into sub-themes that provide a nuanced understanding of the complexities faced by OSY.

##### *Theme 1: Sense of Belonging*

The theme of belonging emerged as a significant challenge for OSY, with many participants expressing disconnection from peers and society. This finding aligns with the literature on social exclusion and marginalization, highlighting the negative impacts of feeling disconnected from social groups and institutions (Smith, 2017). Because OSY frequently discussed and almost always experienced a sense of oppression and exclusion, the topic of "Sense of Belonging" became a focal point of discussion. They demonstrated how seclusion from social life and community eroded one's identity and self-worth. One participant expressed extreme alienation, noting,

*"I feel invisible, like no one sees me or cares about my future."*

This remains one of the most pressing topics in the literature on social exclusion and marginalization. This is due to the psychological and emotional consequences of being excluded from social groups and institutions (UNESCO 2019). Research suggests that a lack of belonging might lead to an identity crisis, as it is a key factor in shaping one's identity (García-Carrión et al., 2019). Communities of Practice can alleviate isolation by fostering inclusive environments that help OSY feel connected and understood. This issue adds validity to Erikson's theory of identity development, which holds that a sense of belonging is required to establish a strong sense of self. CoPs can be quite effective in helping OSY regain a sense of self by combating social isolation. In practice, the findings suggest that CoPs should prioritize making their workplaces more welcoming and fostering community among their members. Activities that promote peer networking and community building should be included in program designs since they make the OSY feel relevant and engaged.

##### *Theme 2: Social Connections*

Despite being aware of the importance of social relationships, respondents reported difficulties building relationships due to a lack of social contacts. One participant stated,

*"I don't have anyone to turn to for help, I just deal with things alone."*

This is congruent with social capital theory, which emphasizes how social networks provide access to resources and aids (Putnam, 2020). Many OSY individuals may be denied access to critical support networks, economic prospects, and educational resources due to a lack of social connections (Li & Lamb, 2021). Several participants related their experiences attempting to make social connections through online forums or street gangs, where underprivileged teenagers are vulnerable to hazards exacerbated by a lack of supportive networks. The findings are consistent with Bourdieu's (1986) concept of social capital, which holds that OSY's social connections – or lack thereof – significantly influence their access to resources and opportunities. CoPs can connect mentors and peers and help them generate social capital. The CoPs should continue to work on building peer support and mentorship initiatives to help OSY students grow their social networks. OSY would become less reliant on negative social influences if they could provide access to required resources such as scholarships, career prospects, and educational opportunities.

### ***Theme 3: Perceived Future Opportunities***

The "Perceived Future Opportunities" motif conveyed an insidiously negative attitude toward OSY's prospective future opportunities. When asked if they could envision themselves going to work or returning to school, one answer articulated the sadness that many OSY felt about their prospects:

*"It's difficult to look to the future when you have no skills or qualifications."*

Research on youth unemployment and skill development is relevant to this overall issue. According to the ILO (2020) report, youngsters without a degree or occupational experience frequently confront significant barriers in their transition into the job market. At a moment when the OSY cannot even perceive a plausible route forward, this could become a self-perpetuating cycle of pessimism and loss of control, as demonstrated by Roberts et al. (2022). This is consistent with Sen's capacity theory 1999, which states that life choices are only as excellent as the possibilities and resources available to one. Alternatively, CoPs can increase their capacities by providing them with job training and career paths, allowing them to make sense of their future and behave in ways that give them agency. To improve OSY's projected possibilities, CoPs should prioritize skills training in practice-relevant areas and career chances. Professional coaching and mentoring help participants gain confidence and skills to live lives that achieve their long-term goals.

### **3.2 Potential Challenges of OSY in Joining Communities of Practices as a Re-Engagement Strategy**

The study also explored potential challenges that OSY might face when joining CoPs. Three key themes emerged: accessibility and inclusivity, financial constraints, and balancing commitments and priorities.

#### ***Theme 1: Accessibility and Inclusivity***

A participant stated,

*"It conflicted with the schedule, or it was too far to go, and I couldn't get a ride,"*

This corresponds to research on equality and access, which emphasizes the reduction of barriers for underrepresented groups (UNESCO, 2019). The inability of OSY to access knowledge sharing and skill development is an obstacle to CoPs. The foundation of this subject is the social justice theory, which maintains that oppressed communities cannot thrive without access to opportunities and facilities. CoPs should undertake programs and activities that promote accessibility, such as providing transportation to members or organizing events at times that are convenient for participants' schedules. According to research, community engagement programs prioritizing accessibility can considerably improve participation among marginalized teenagers (Blumenthal & Hodge, 2021).

#### ***Theme 2: Financial Constraints***

Financial barriers emerged as a significant obstacle for OSY seeking to participate in CoPs. The costs associated with participation, including materials and other expenses, presented a significant challenge for those with limited financial resources. Participants described needing help to afford these costs, ultimately impacting their ability to fully engage in and benefit from community activities. This highlights the need for strategies to address financial barriers and ensure equitable access to CoP opportunities for all OSY. One participant stated,

*"I cannot afford the materials; it's too expensive for me,"*

This demonstrates that financial constraints are a serious impediment. According to recent research, financial constraints prevent low-income kids from participating in various social and educational programs (Biddle and Gordon, 2019). These impediments must be addressed so that everyone has an equal chance of fully pursuing CoP opportunities. According to social capital theories, money is required to take advantage of and gain access to opportunities and networks. In the case of OSYs, insufficient funds may hinder them from fully participating in CoPs, and, as a result, they may lose access to central support networks. To address budget limits, CoPs should provide free scholarships or resources. Evidence also shows that relief programs concerning the financial burden have increased involvement among low-income youths.

### **Theme 3: Balancing Commitments and Priorities**

OSY needs help juggling so many duties. A participant commented,

*"I have to work and care for my siblings; it's difficult to find time."*

This statement is consistent with research on people's difficulty managing their time while juggling many responsibilities (Drucker, 2019). CoPs can enhance participation by offering customizable program forms that accommodate a variety of schedules. According to Greenhaus and Allen (2011), the work-life balance theory highlights the importance of flexibility in program design to help people juggle competing demands. Rigid programs risk alienating prospective participants who are already overwhelmed with commitments. CoPs must provide options for online engagement and flexible scheduling so that OSY can participate without endangering their other responsibilities. According to research, programs offering flexible participation options have much greater youth involvement and retention rates. The difficulties OSY encountered in joining CoPs highlight the importance of intelligent program design that takes into account accessibility, budgetary limits, and commitment balancing. If the findings from this study are integrated and aligned with the current literature, CoPs can be more effective as OSY re-engagement tactics.

## **4.0 Conclusion**

This study focused on exploring the potential of Communities of Practice (CoPs) as a strategy for re-engaging out-of-school youth (OSY) in the Philippines, revealing both the promise and challenges associated with this approach. The findings highlight the critical role of CoPs in fostering a sense of belonging, promoting social connections, and providing opportunities for skill development among OSY. However, the study also identified significant barriers to participation, including accessibility, financial constraints, and the need to balance multiple commitments. The study's key contributions lie in its in-depth exploration of OSY's subjective experiences within CoPs, uncovering the nuanced challenges they face and the critical elements needed for successful re-engagement. The proposed operational plan for a CoP program in Barangay Nagtenga, Sta. Cruz, Ilocos Sur, serves as a practical example of how community-driven initiatives can address OSY's specific needs. This study emphasizes the importance of individualized CoP programs that address the unique circumstances and challenges OSY faces.

The applicability and compatibility of the theories used in this study – particularly those related to Communities of Practice (CoPs), social capital, and identity formation – are critical for understanding the re-engagement of out-of-school adolescents in the Philippines. The theoretical framework underlying CoPs emphasizes the value of shared learning and collective involvement, consistent with the study's findings highlighting the necessity for a supportive setting where OSY can build skills and foster social ties. As stated by Bourdieu, the concept of social capital emphasizes the importance of social networks in accessing resources and opportunities, which is especially significant given the participants' experiences of isolation and lack of social connections. This theoretical lens sheds light on OSY's challenges in developing meaningful relationships that can help them reintegrate into school and occupational trajectories. Furthermore, the theory of identity formation, based on Erikson's work, sheds light on the difficulties that OSY faces in developing a sense of belonging and self-worth, which are crucial for their motivation and involvement. By integrating these ideas, the study not only exposes the various obstacles that OSY confronts but also emphasizes the promise of CoPs as a transformative method for building belonging, increasing social capital, and eventually allowing OSY to envisage and seek brighter futures. This complete theoretical framework thus provides a solid platform for understanding the dynamics of re-engagement and significant insights for designing and implementing community-driven initiatives adapted to OSY's unique needs.

Future research should further explore the long-term impact of CoPs on OSY re-engagement, including their impact on educational attainment, employment prospects, and overall well-being. Additionally, further investigation into the effectiveness of different CoP models, including virtual platforms, is needed to address accessibility challenges and promote inclusivity. By building upon the findings of this study and engaging in ongoing research and development, we can continue to refine and strengthen the role of CoPs as a powerful tool for empowering out-of-school youth and fostering their successful re-engagement in education and society.



## 5.0 Contributions of Authors

Liza D. Diez - writing and editing the research article, Jomari C. Samson - editing and enhancing the research article, Jocelyn M. Javier data analysis of the study, Marisol C. Salvador, Rowena C. Oris - writing and revision editing of the research article, and Arrianne Michelle F. Fabro - initiated the conduct of the study and supervising the holistic aspect of the research article.

## 6.0 Funding

The study was made possible through the researchers' initiatives, particularly at their own expense in funding the study.

## 7.0 Conflict of Interests

The researchers don't have any conflict of interest to declare.

## 8.0 Acknowledgment

The researchers sincerely thank Almighty God for His unwavering guidance and support throughout this endeavor. We are deeply indebted to the countless individuals who contributed to the successful completion of this study.

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