



Australian Government

Department of Families, Community Services  
and Indigenous Affairs



## Research in Action: A Guide to Best Practice in Participatory Action Research

Improving the lives of Australians

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## Executive summary

Participatory Action Research (PAR) continues to be a key component of the Reconnect program and all Reconnect specialist services. In this process the Reconnect workers themselves become the researchers evaluating their day-to-day work. PAR encompasses a systematic and cyclical process of observing, reflecting, planning, acting and sharing and has shown to be one of the most effective methods of general problem solving at the local level.

As a practice it is empowering, enabling those who are most directly affected to make positive changes. It acknowledges that service providers, being at the 'coalface' of service provision, have the best vantage point to critically evaluate their services. This is due to being best placed to understand what does and does not work in practice.

In 2009, the Reconnect Online Data System (RODS) was introduced in order to allow a more robust and standardised way to collect and store Reconnect data which has substantially changed the methods for inputting and submitting PAR reports. This report was commissioned by the Department of Families Housing Community Services and Indigenous Affairs (FaHCSIA) to review the use and application of PAR across all Reconnect programs as a result of this.

Therefore, the purpose of this document is to conduct a systematic qualitative analysis of service provider reports in order to gain insight into the national approach to PAR - specifically highlighting common themes, areas for improvement, and identifying examples of 'best practice'. This report is intended to be used alongside the existing library of guidance of applying PAR within Reconnect Services<sup>1</sup>. However, it includes a supplementary element; by directly drawing on examples of PAR reports, we are able to demonstrate current perceptions and uses of PAR including quotes which further demonstrate typical experiences of utilising PAR.

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<sup>1</sup>Crane, P and Richardson, L (2000). Reconnect Action Research Kit.  
[http://www.fahcsia.gov.au/internet/facsinternet.nsf/housing/reconnect\\_action\\_research\\_kit.htm](http://www.fahcsia.gov.au/internet/facsinternet.nsf/housing/reconnect_action_research_kit.htm)

While, emergent themes were generally consistent across Reconnect services, the methodologies and approaches to tackle them were more diverse with some proving more successful than others. Between financial years 2009/10 and 2010/11, service providers completed and submitted a total of 412 PAR reports which were examined in order to identify the following:

- typical approaches to PAR;
- issues being highlighted in reports;
- what type of techniques are being employed to conduct PAR;
- what types of successes are and have been achieved;
- which stakeholders are involved; and
- what kind of lessons have been and are being learned as a result of using PAR.

This analysis has demonstrated that PAR is seen as a useful and effective tool for reviewing and improving practice and furthermore has helped develop positive outcomes for clients and services alike. Furthermore, several services provided feedback that their projects were successful, and would appreciate the opportunity to share their learnings and experiences of PAR with colleagues. This method of sharing learning and experiences may well be a positive opportunity for all services to pass on expertise, share ideas and success stories, and gain knowledge and understanding regarding the generation of positive changes for services, clients, workers and the wider community. Subsequently, it is expected that the findings and conclusions from this report will provide encouragement and inspiration for continuing to complete the Participatory Action Reports.

For the purpose of this report, it is important to note that the scope for PAR is so widespread and varied that there is generally no 'right' or 'wrong' approach. However, certain areas for improvement were identified throughout the analysis, particularly with regard to reporting the PAR process.

It is important that the PAR reports are succinctly and transparently written so as to allow the reader to have a clear understanding of not only 'how' and 'why' the research was conducted but also what the results were and what was learnt from the process. The PAR reports should achieve a balance between describing the narrative of the research process as well as describing the mechanisms used to execute this.

The 'best practice' examples highlighted within this report have been included due to their attempts to achieve this balance but also due to the positive messages of effectiveness depicted. These reports also adhered and made reference to the PAR principles including stakeholder involvement and the PAR cycle of 'observe, reflect, plan, and action'.

It is anticipated that the findings of this analysis will help those who have not yet fully incorporated PAR principles to try to, as well as endorse those who are more practiced at PAR by demonstrating their successes and achievements. It is intended that this will provide ideas on how to improve PAR processes undertaken, and consequently the Reconnect services as a whole.



# Key findings

1. The practice of PAR appears to have been successfully integrated into services with the vast majority identifying appropriate research questions and adopting approaches to conduct research effectively.
2. The evidence assessed within this review also indicates positive outcomes and genuine change are being achieved as a result of these processes.
3. The reports demonstrate that service providers are dedicated to maintaining the effectiveness and relevance of the Reconnect program.
4. Reconnect workers are playing a pivotal role in the execution of research projects and the resulting programs. Their continued resilience and determination has brought about the changes needed to impact services and consequently the lives of those most vulnerable to homelessness and its associated issues.
5. Collaborative work, of any kind, is seen valuable and beneficial but should be driven by client needs and profiles.
6. One potential area for improvement lies within the reporting and written elements of the PAR process. Some indicators and suggestions have been provided in order to improve this process.
7. Reconnect services are eager to share their learning and experiences with other services. This report aims to help achieve this by identifying common issues, approaches and outcomes, and also by sharing examples of 'best practice'.





# Part 1: Qualitative data analysis

Of the 412 reports submitted during financial year 2009/10 and 2011/12, 198 were included in the analysis for this best practice guidance report. The selection methodology was, for the most part, randomised; however, care was taken to include at least one report from each service. In certain instances some services had more than one report included, however this was either due to random selection or for situations where numerous reports had been completed on the same topic, therefore, forming a series of reports for the same research question.

Reports were analysed thematically in that data from PAR reports was systematically examined in order to identify any emergent themes or recurrent patterns. A thematic matrix was created whereby each PAR report was assessed in accordance with 4 key areas:

1. Approaches to PAR;
2. The key issues highlighted;
3. Techniques, strategies and efficacy; and
4. What was learnt from applying PAR.

## Key Area 1: Approaches to PAR

Reports indicated that the inspiration for many action research projects came from the instinctive, work-related observations of Reconnect staff. This easily accessible method of identifying areas for improvement confirms that Reconnect staff are the optimum source of information regarding issues and pressures prevalent in their own services.

Staff observations have been instrumental in identifying gaps in service provision and delivery and ascertaining shifts in prevailing client demographics and client needs. For example, changes to the sociological context of the service and the region it serves, awareness of other agencies, and examining internal service-level issues such as staffing needs.

Additionally, project inspiration was identified as having evolved by client and stakeholder feedback driving action research questions. Furthermore, on several occasions reports indicated that Reconnect was approached by other agencies, organisations and even clients who requested their assistance for specific cases, problems or concerns. This in particular is a very positive indication that the Reconnect service is known and respected within the community, and is seen as an approachable source for help. By acting on this feedback Reconnect is showing dedication to ensuring the relevance of the service to client and community needs and to continuously improving service delivery.



The relationships between these themes are often comorbid between these themes, in that when deterioration occurs in one area it can have negative effects on several areas (for example, a young person's inability to channel aggression appropriately can adversely affect behaviour in school, potentially leading to exclusions and even disengagement with education which increases the risk of homelessness). Fortunately, the reverse is also true as intervening in one area can often have positive effects on numerous other areas. This is consistent with the holistic approach embedded within Reconnect practice and policies.

This section specifically focuses on the prevalent issues identified throughout the qualitative analysis. The next section will proceed to identify strategies used and successes achieved when tackling these issues.

## Outcomes based themes

### *Education*

This was the most frequently addressed area possibly due to the perception that schools and educational institutions are hugely influential on young people and have significant impacts on every aspect of their present and future lives. Primarily, research projects focussed on improving young people's engagement with education or training and the most appropriate and effective ways in which this could be achieved.

Schools were observed to be well placed in the identification of needs and the application of early intervention, often being referred to as a "first to know" agency and given this, concerns were raised regarding the school's ability to cater for early intervention when these issues first arise. Many services reported a perception that schools were failing to meet the needs of young people who are homeless or at risk of homelessness, including issues such as insufficient awareness of client confidentiality issues, and limited resources and experience for dealing with certain client groups including newly arrived young people, Indigenous, and Gay Lesbian Transgender Bisexual and Intersex (GLBTI) young people. Even more challenging is the observed trend by services for schools to increasingly use exclusionary policies instead of intervention strategies in their attempts to deal with young people with disruptive behaviours by enforcing suspensions, partial attendance measures and expulsion.

Anecdotal information and observations from Reconnect staff noted that relationships with schools and teachers were vital to engagement. Self-reported data and feedback from young people cited having poor relationships with teachers as a further reason to disengage; whereas positive relationships can have *"a significant role in the young person's success at school as well as their sense of overall well-being"*.

Education is a key aspect in intervention and crisis prevention. It is frequently a step in gaining further training or vocational skills and helping young people to become job ready which can be very valuable given that the provision of employment is a protective factor in stabilising accommodation.

However, schools and staff were not believed to possess a great deal of experience for dealing with this highly vulnerable client group which was thought to cause or exacerbate disengagement creating significant repercussions for the young person's future and potentially increasing the risk of homelessness.

From these concerns, improving working relationships with schools was identified as a priority area for many of the service providers. This was anticipated to have reciprocal benefits with Reconnect providing support to educational institutes who in turn provided venues, identified appropriate individuals for referral and assisted in creating relationships with clients, their families and other stakeholders.

### *Community engagement*

Improving young people's engagement with their community was also a prominent theme that emerged due to the acknowledgement of the numerous benefits this holistic approach enables including capacity building for young people, increasing community investment and improving social capital.

Generally, it was reported that clients were more likely to distance themselves from their communities (and services acknowledged that this was seen to aggravate issues) if living situations become increasingly unstable. Building community engagement is a protective factor against crises and disengagement, therefore many services focussed on the development of projects to improve this.

This has resulted in interventions and pilot programs which concentrate on increasing engagement with certain activities (such as allied youth clubs and events) as well as improving young people's engagement with the community in a much broader sense to incorporate individuals, businesses and agencies that it encompasses. Service providers' direct role in brokering relationships between clients and community organisations has taken precedence within many of the PAR research questions and links in to pervasive concerns regarding adopting positive working relationships with community stakeholders. Furthermore, many resolved to increase young people's awareness of engagement opportunities in order to improve social inclusion and social capital.

### *Parents/carers and families*

A need for increased support provision to parents and carers was identified by many agencies, although there appeared to be a variety of approaches regarding how to proceed with this. While families are clearly a significant factor in young people's lives, many questioned the rationale for working as closely with parents when it is felt that Reconnect is primarily a young persons' service. For example, some noted a potential conflict of interest arising when referrals are received from parents as this potentially creates barriers to engaging the young person. When initial contact is made by parents, the young person might feel that the service is '*on the parent's side*'.

Regardless, many of the projects focussed on the need to improve family participation as a tool to reduce conflicts within the household to anticipate and prevent crises, and encourage parents to participate more in their child's lives, for example, by ensuring that the young person attends school and appointments. Intervention may need to focus on improving communication skills between members of the family, particularly parents/carers and children as this was observed to lead to conflicts and feelings of exclusion, consequently significantly increasing the risk of homelessness.

### *Addressing violence and aggression*

A reported increase in aggressive behaviour from young people has raised particular concerns with regard to how these behaviours are increasing the risk of homelessness. For example, violent and aggressive behaviours at school meant that schools often had to resort to exclusionary measures when the conduct became untenable for staff and students alike.

However, behaviours were often felt to be an indication of what was happening within the home environment whether the young person was a victim of violence or the possibility that parents were becoming victims of this aggression themselves. Both situations significantly increase the risk of homelessness with the likelihood that the young person might leave the home environment or that he or she is asked to leave. Scenarios such as these are contributing to the increase in young people experiencing accommodation crises and resorting to unstable and unsafe options such as 'couch surfing' and having negative impacts on young people who are already vulnerable.

One concern was that families are only attempting to engage with Reconnect once they have exhausted their ability to cope, negating the early intervention approach adopted by the service and identifying a need to engage families earlier to enable more preventative work. However, anger management programs were felt to be particularly challenging given the potential barriers of people not acknowledging an issue with anger as it requires overcoming difficult obstacles and working towards change. Nevertheless, efforts must be made to address these issues with greater education of anger management as well as wider social education to increase awareness of domestic violence being needed in order to tackle these issues. In particular, programs for independent living skills were employed to address aggressive behaviours with programs being created to educate young people and their families alike on creating and maintaining healthy relationships as well as providing creative outlets to channel and divert emotions in safer and more constructive ways.

### *Culturally appropriate work*

Culturally appropriate work was a key concern for many of the agencies, encompassing a range of cultures and values including individuals of Aboriginal or Torres Strait Island descent, newly arrived young people, or those in minority groups including GLBTI individuals. These issues were also particularly relevant in areas with increasing immigrant populations where, traumatic experiences, language difficulties and conflicting social values can create or intensify barriers to integration. This can increase social exclusion, conflicts within the home environment, and subsequently the risk of homelessness.

For Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander individuals, it was identified that many areas lacked indigenous specific services and were therefore failing to meet vital social and psychological needs. For all these groups, issues of bullying and isolation were thought to be common. Many Reconnect services felt that it was important to present the service as multicultural and accepting of different lifestyles to appeal and seem approachable to any young person in a minority group who may be experiencing these problems.

### *Life-skills training*

Understandably, teaching essential life skills to young people who are homeless or at risk of homelessness is seen to be a vital part of work in this sector. It is important to talk to young people about their life skills as much of this information is unfamiliar to clients and issues can be overlooked. While this does not necessarily comprise of only practical living skills, there is an increased need for this given that many clients are becoming parents themselves. Generally, psycho-social development has been identified as a great concern within the age-group that Reconnect generally serves as clients are in a period of transition where intellectual, social and emotional development needs are prevalent. Many young people lack self-esteem and require guidance on the development of healthy relationships. New methods to help develop these skills are required, for example, using art programs to aid self-expression and providing opportunities to be peer leaders are common positive methods which are thought to aid psycho-social development.

This psychologically based work is related to a reported increase in the use of mental health services. There is a perceived role for Reconnect to provide coping skills for young people dealing with these issues of homelessness due to their association with anxiety disorders such as depression. However, this has led to particular concerns given that many areas are finding that there are insufficient services to refer these issues on to. Furthermore, there is a reported gap in general for the numbers attending these services as opposed to those who have been referred. This is significant as there was also an observed increase in disengagement with education as a result of drug and alcohol abuse.

## Principles of practice themes

Many services reviewed their own practice in order to find ways to make services more efficient and relevant to client needs. This identified service gaps and areas for improvement which then became the focus of the PAR. The qualitative analysis identified several key emergent themes with regards to common issues for ensuring good practice principles.

### *Service provision*

Aspects of services provision were investigated to gain insight into what may hinder their ability to operate at optimum level. Evaluations were conducted to find whether resources and budgets were being used as effectively as possible. Methods were diverse from encompassing reviews of staffing profiles and training needs to investigating procedures such as alternative referral pathways for clients; ensuring representativeness of the client population such as age and cultural groups; and improving feedback gathering techniques.

### *Improving collaborative work*

The issue of the need for better collaboration was prevalent throughout the majority of reports given that the consequence of this is multidimensional. For example, many services reported issues with inappropriate referrals due to lack of understanding not only about the Reconnect service but also regarding the concept of homelessness more broadly. This is potentially damaging given the impact that this can have on service times and workload turnover. In particular, some agencies were more likely to refer clients who had complex needs and were in crisis as opposed to the early interventionist work that is Reconnects' responsibility.

Some agencies and institutions were particularly singled out as vital agencies with which to create close working relationships, particularly 'first to know' agencies such as schools and Centrelink - who are seen as a valuable source of information. Furthermore, there were agencies where a need for better procedures was identified, for example, many young people have reported difficulties with the Centrelink service, finding it confusing and unapproachable.

For these services, and numerous others, it is important that all relevant agencies work together to reduce service gaps, create better referral and information sharing processes, and increase accessibility for clients in order to improve overall outcomes. Efforts within this were particularly focussed on increasing collaborative work with a diverse range of stakeholders through such tried and tested methods as networking, attending other service and agency meetings and inviting representatives to attend internal meetings. Also, improving feedback mechanisms was identified as a focus point in order to gain insight and improve services.



## Key Area 3: Techniques, strategies and efficacy

Approaches to conducting the PAR involved diverse and multifaceted strategies; however, common techniques and objectives could be derived from the qualitative analysis with emergent themes dividing into two areas: methodological strategies and strategies for delivery. What is clear from analysis of the project reports is the pivotal role Reconnect workers played and continue to play in not only the research projects but also the resulting programs and initiatives. Many reports describe key Reconnect individuals and teams driving change, for example by chairing groups and enlisting support internally and externally. It is this continued resilience and determination which has brought about changes needed to impact on services and consequently the lives of those most vulnerable to homelessness and its associated issues.

There have been some very affirming success stories described in the PAR reports with many depicting positive outcomes for young people as well as positive impacts on practice. Overall, the majority of projects were effective with significant outcomes produced being reported as a direct result of actions taken and techniques adopted. Generally, the risk of homelessness and the contributory and co-morbid factors associated with it were thought to be greatly reduced as a result of staff efforts with PAR.

### Methodological strategies

#### *Consultations*

The most obvious and common strategy noted throughout the majority of reports was the conduction of consultations which were employed with virtually every type of stakeholder Reconnect is linked with.

Encouragingly, a majority of services directly involved young people within the consultation process as young people were considered to be the key stakeholders in the research projects. These consultations helped to gain insights into client needs and acquire a clearer picture of the existing barriers from the young person's perspective. This was thought to increase case managers' knowledge, enabling more accurate understanding of suitable methods to problem solve, and ensures subsequent programs' suitability. Many reports specifically highlighted the fact that "*young people continue to hold the most important information about how to talk with them*" and given this "*finding out what the young people need and not just telling them*" is vital for improving effectiveness and efficiency as it enables young people to participate in actions creating meaningful change.

Similar results were also achieved for consultations with other stakeholders including families, community members and other agencies. Further to the 'information gathering' aspect of consultations, they also served to enable participation for all stakeholders, helping to establish new working relationships, not only externally with partner organisations, but internally with other local Reconnect services. While not all attempts to work with other services and agencies were successful, it was felt that making attempts to link in were still meaningful. Further benefits of developing a consulting relationship were evident when projects wished to evaluate an initiative or gain feedback on the effectiveness of previous programs or pilots. This is seen as an essential component for collaboration.

## *Collaboration*

It was reported that many services were able to develop collaborative working skills including networking, creating and developing new partnerships, and establishing information sharing protocols. One key method was increased networking, attending other agencies and services team meetings where Reconnect workers were able to discuss current issues and provide presentations to increase awareness of the Reconnect service. This was reciprocal and enabled reflection and increased understanding of the procedures and service of other agencies.

The subsequent collaborative discussions, brainstorming sessions, working parties and advisory groups have reportedly increased understanding of the Reconnect service to other agencies. This also led to an increase in awareness of other services in the local area which has helped develop formal collaborations and improve working relationships subsequently decreasing the risk of 'doubling up' on delivery.

While often these consultations occurred on an informal basis such as face-to-face meetings, or via e-mail or telephone, many services employed more formal approaches using surveys and questionnaires. However, the results of these formal approaches were mixed, as while some found this yielded good response rates and retrieved frank and honest information, it was more commonly reported that response rates were very low from clients and agencies alike. While this was thought to be because many were simply unwilling to take part; language barriers and poor literacy in young people were also thought to exacerbate this issue potentially by causing embarrassment generating inaccurate responses. Given this, many projects concluded that face-to-face consultations were more valuable for information gathering.

Many reports made reference to specific organisations that it was felt to be 'imperative' to work with. There are obvious logistical and resource restrictions to maintaining positive working relationships with so many different types of organisations. However, a significant conclusion is that collaborative work, of any kind, is valuable and beneficial. While there are some organisations that appear almost universally (such as schools and Centrelink), as a general rule, the type of agencies that services collaborate with should be dictated by prevalent client needs and profiles.

## *Information and procedural review*

Many services chose to conduct internal assessments of procedures and practices by utilising their available in-house data. Many concentrated on reviewing client information in order to understand the profile of service users, as well as, gain insight into referral information with particular attention given to those agencies which were known to have provided inappropriate referrals.

A minority of services employed more technical methods of investigation utilising literature reviews to not only increase awareness of existing research within their chosen research questions, but also to help identify existing practices and programs that could be extracted or adopted. This provided inspiration for new practices and service delivery methods, and confirmed observations to support the focus of the research project. One project successfully adapted a 'ready-made' program with proven efficacy, to meet their specific needs as opposed to developing a similar service which would consume valuable time and resources.

In reviewing procedural documentation, services were able to establish which processes were ineffectual, for example, many reported insufficient referral forms and processes. This enabled focus on ways to improve these which may help reduce issues such as inappropriate referrals but also the consequences of these, such as developing alternative referral pathways for clients where the Reconnect service was deemed to be unsuitable or if waiting lists were too long. For example, some services have now adapted their procedures to incorporate more user-friendly methods of referral including electronic methods (i.e. making documents available on the website or by e-mail). This allowed processes to be streamlined and reduced the risks of a young person 'falling through the gaps'. While this was not always successful, with some projects reporting a continuation of inappropriate referrals, the majority reported a significant improvement.

Furthermore, in order to ensure that service provision continued to be relevant and effective, many services aimed to improve feedback processes by attempting to gain increased and regular feedback from a variety of sources including clientele, their families and other relevant agencies. Internal evaluations have also been an effective approach with one service ascertaining that a particular initiative they were resourcing was, in fact,

not reaching the intended client group and was furthermore utilising a lot of staff time and funding. Given this, a decision to not continue with the program was reached and resources were able to be redistributed elsewhere as a result.

Workers drove change in internal processes which ensured that relevant issues were kept on agendas and at the forefront of staff discussion to be regularly reviewed and reflected-on. Team meetings were increasingly used as opportunities to focus on current practice. This provided opportunities to have discussions in a supportive environment which subsequently increased workers confidence in their actions and practice with clients.

Collaborative agreements with other agencies and services were set up to be more strategic. Many build on existing relationships or developed new ones in order to progress effective information sharing processes, for example, with local police services to gain access to crime statistics. Developing these relationships was seen to have an abundance of benefits including easier and smoother referral processes and closer working relationships to aid joint service delivery. Working collaboratively together can help reduce the risk of homelessness for vulnerable young people and enables any emerging issues to be resolved quickly between agencies.

Many services also described the benefits of collaboration for providing peer support, explaining that it is reassuring when discussing issues with other service providers and agencies to know that others were experiencing similar issues which could contribute to a multi-disciplinary problem solving approach. Furthermore, discussion with peers also brought encouragement, reflective practice and reduced onus on any one agency or service.

## **Service delivery**

### *Improving working relationship with schools*

Overall PAR reports indicated that prevention programs that focus on the young person are not as effective as those that simultaneously educate and create positive changes. Schools were felt to be a potential setting for collaborations to deliver such fully integrated models. Given this, many services focussed on approaching schools in order to form better working relationships. In particular, High School Principals were regularly cited as key contacts that had been or should be approached. Other school staff who were believed to have good access to students who fit the Reconnect profile. In reports school contacts proved to be valuable in identifying suitable student participants for programs.

Methods to involve schools appear to have been effective with many reporting their direct involvement in projects, even providing assistance such as venues for program delivery. Generally, this was successful although it was important to get the timing of this right as after school clients seemed too occupied and just wanted to go home, similarly, programs delivered just before school holidays generated low attendance. In several, it was reported that lunch-time programs were more successful for engagement and attendance.

Furthermore, schools have been valuable in employing their position as a known and trusted institute to enable further connections not only with other educational organisations but particularly with engaging young people themselves and their families for current and future programs. From this, there was an observed increase in the number of referrals coming to Reconnect services from schools.

Positive outcomes have emerged from forging closer working relationships with schools. Reconnect staff have been able to attend pre-exclusion meetings, allowing for earlier intervention and increased support to help the young person remain engaged with education. This was often manifest in the arrangement and negotiation of alternative education provisions where required. These also led to the development of project ideas such as situating outreach centres within schools which were felt to be particularly effective where teachers were able to approach Reconnect workers for assistance to work with students presenting specific needs in order to challenge behaviours (including aggression and truancy) and minimise the consequences of these.

### *Delivery of new and development of existing programs*

This by far was what most PAR reports focussed on, with the vast majority introducing methods of delivering new interventions for young people. Program design and delivery was frequently based on stakeholder consultations ensuring that methodologies were relevant to clients. The consultations enabled participants to assist in the creation and design of the program which demonstrated the value of their opinions and their ability to influence. It was felt that this increased investment in the programs created and embedded their success.

Creating new programs was seen as important, for example, one service stated “*It is important not to become complacent about youth participation and always try new things*”. It was overwhelmingly reported that young people were receptive and engaged well in new programs and initiatives. Many workers attributed much of the success to the fact that young people and clients were able to build trusting relationships. While the range of programs was diverse, there are some emergent program themes evident from the analysis.

#### **Youth clubs**

In this approach, young people are able take part in activities and socialise where interventionist aspects are minimal. This was seen to be a particularly useful method when attendance was falling as this approach appeals more to young people therefore increasing engagement due the ‘fun’ activities aspects. However, this style also makes help and advice available to those who wish (for example, providing access to computers to help with homework, or with job hunting, including navigating Centrelink requirements).

Some employed the youth clubs as a diversionary method to ‘*get young people off the streets*’ during times when data indicated that risks of offending were higher. This was found to be particularly successful with programs that had focussed on offending behaviours, reportedly effecting a reduction in risky behaviours, especially during the times when clubs were being run. Youth clubs provide approachable and stress-free environments to help build rapport and encourage familiarity with the Reconnect service and staff. Often these initiatives were delivered in collaboration with a variety of local and national service providers, in particular local police services were significant collaborators in many initiatives. Local youth agencies, and nationally DHS Child Protection were also noted to be significantly involved in many projects.

#### **Family initiatives**

Many partnering agencies and organisations such as Police and DHS identified Reconnect service providers as highly skilled in working with parents and families. This external acknowledgement has fed into many services focussing on family orientated initiatives. However, while many positives were identified as a result of this work, it was noted that for families who were not committed to change on some level or unwilling to participate, often attempts to involve them in work could lead to further lack of engagement.

With the identified need to reduce family conflicts, several programs were created which helped teach young people and their families/carers skills for positive communication. Early intervention is thought to be vital in this area as it prevents further crises from arising. This was achieved by simply providing opportunities to become more involved through positive interaction in activities, family mediation, or even through specific programs and workshops designed for parents. Parent programs were not just developed for the parents of clients, but also for clients who had become parents themselves and who were at risk of isolation and required assistance in developing independent living skills not just for themselves but also their own families.

#### **Independent living skills**

Programs designed to teach those who were homeless or at risk of homelessness the skills they need to live independently were seen as vital and generally took place via workshops and group sessions. One program involved providing workshops to young women seen to be lacking self-esteem and aimed to educate on various aspects such as maintaining hygiene and appearance, along with being taught about healthy relationships. Other approaches involved providing transitional housing support with cooking skills and forced savings programs. A large aspect of these also focussed on anger management skills and developing healthy relationships, particularly in young men. Many workers and professional colleagues identified this specific area as a concern given its correlation with increased risks of homelessness.

It was common for these programs to be delivered in school environments and to be co-facilitated with other agencies that had specialised experience of delivering aspects of the programs that Reconnect services did not possess. Many projects reported that young people, particularly young parents benefitted by gaining more self-esteem with a more stable sense of self and increased capacity to undertake the challenges of parenting. It was observed that, through educating young people on independent living skills, many demonstrated increased likelihood of processing situations appropriately and making more informed decisions in day to day life including reducing aggression and violence. Furthermore, many programs received feedback that young people were feeling more independent. There was also informal feedback from many participants that they would like to take part in further self-development courses.

### **Diversity and culture**

As racial tensions and cultural clashes were observed as a common experience for many clients, it was seen to be important that Reconnect highlight cultural diversity in order to promote respect and build healthy relationships. These programs took place mostly within schools and particularly in communities with larger populations of newly arrived young people. Team work and activities were incorporated and this interactive program delivery was thought to contribute to increased engagement.

In line with this, and in a more internally focussed action, services also made their working environments more welcoming, to appeal to minority groups such as Indigenous young people or young people who were GLBTI. Posters and information leaflets were put on display in reception areas in order to convey approachability of the service encompassing all backgrounds.

Some services demonstrated they were able to link in with Indigenous communities and elders and worked with culturally specific services. For Indigenous young people and newly arrived young people building a trusting relationship was felt to be particularly important. This was due to observed reservations with working with what is perceived as 'outside' agencies. Furthermore, for young people who had experienced trauma, gaining trust is an important part of the recovery process as allows the client to feel safe in order to begin the healing process.

Furthermore, specialist external agencies were brought in to aid in delivering training such as 'Work it Out' and 'Menslink' who consulted and delivered training on 'Sexuality and Gender Diversity'.

### **Employment and training**

Several programs looked at ways to radically improve young people's chances of obtaining employment as this was felt to be an important factor in reducing the risk of homelessness. Many successfully assisted clients to gain practical skills for obtaining employment such as writing a resume, conducting job searches, gaining interview experiences and, in certain programs, clients were even able to secure references. It was reported that young people were able to carry these tasks out with confidence and were comfortable to ask for help. One service reported:

*"There is a noticeable change in the young people who have participated in this project; they have an improved sense of self-belief and self-esteem. They have the ability to test out different roles in a supportive environment and learn practical skills they can use for the rest of their lives."*

Many of these programs required close working relationships to be developed with employment focussed agencies such as Campbell Page, Centacare, Workways, Joblink Plus and other local employment agencies. Centrelink, in particular, was regularly cited as a key collaborator in these and many other programs, with Centrelink Social Workers and Engagement Officers acting as points of contact and providing solutions. Many of these programs cited successes which resulted in employment for young people.

### **Group Work**

Group work allows young people to engage with others in smaller groups and controlled situations and often incorporates team working strategies and social contexts, which young people can apply in other situations. Group programs which included sport and active aspects were felt to be particularly useful as all young people could participate regardless of language or cultural background. While it was felt that group work could be labour intensive, it was believed to have great capacity to add value to individual client work.

This type of work was also found to be successful for helping young people of different cultures and backgrounds to relate to, and associate with each other more. When activities were introduced group work projects were seen to overcome cultural barriers and help young people to work together.

### **Young leadership initiatives**

These initiatives provided young people with the opportunity to take on roles with more responsibility. These initiatives focussed on helping young people to gain leadership skills including event management, and how to address forums of professional people, acting as ambassadors and taking part in large events and local initiatives including Harmony Day, Sleep-Out Events, and the Domestic Violence Initiative, White Ribbon Day. Delivery of these events required input from multiple agencies specifically Young Woman's Christian Association (YWCA), Youth Coalition, and Youth Enterprise Initiatives.

In addition to gaining these valuable skills young people also reported feeling empowered and listened to as well as gaining self-esteem. These initiatives were also instrumental in providing many young people with the opportunity to 'give back' to the Reconnect service. For example, many were involved in helping new and younger clients by sharing their experiences and helping them address their issues such as coming to terms with sexuality. One service observed that: *"given the opportunity to shine, many young people will step up to the challenge"*.

Young people were overwhelmingly positive about the concept of becoming youth leaders and were not only willing to engage and to continue to engage in projects, but were also able to provide valuable insight into how to engage other young people. There are many benefits to engaging young people in projects such as these as they bring about positive social change and awareness raising. Not only does it build self-esteem and awareness raising in a way that direct work isn't able to, but also by putting responsibilities of continuing initiatives into the hands of young people, which this enable continuation even if limited Reconnect provisions and resources can't.

### **Staffing matters**

Many services identified training and development needs such as anger management training and building resilience in young people. However, 'train the trainer' programs were also developed in order to deliver training to not only colleagues but further include parents and carers with regards to techniques for communication as well as dealing with adolescent violence. Often services would attend community training events; however, on occasion specialist training was brought in in order to develop particular skills. It was reported that increasing training has increased staff confidence in their work.

Working in partnership with other organisations, particularly those with specialised services, helped to 'fill gaps' in the Reconnect service delivery providing opportunities that clients might not otherwise be afforded and further resulting in a more holistic service. These approaches were also valuable in supplementing staff training, learning and development. The newly established collaborative working procedures were useful in reciprocating training opportunities, for example, with local community organisations such as a suicide prevention services; equally Reconnect services were able to provide training to others in the community which not only assisted in increasing understanding of homelessness but also increased community abilities to assist young people facing the issues generated by this.

Some services reported acquiring new members of staff to fill gaps including Project Managers, Researchers, and Psychologists, as well as hiring staff with particular profiles such as employing more male workers or those within indigenous backgrounds. This, in particular, was seen as useful as it helped vulnerable young aboriginal people experience a positive male role model. However, it was found that ultimately the gender of the worker had little impact on redressing the disproportion of gender divides for new clients or on the overall outcomes for each client.

The use of volunteers appeared to be an important aspect for many projects, particularly those who were running or piloting workshops. One service report stated that *“It is critical to include volunteer help where possible”*. Volunteers from a variety of backgrounds were engaged including medical students who delivered session on sexual health and local community members who assisted at events. One service remarked on how best to accomplish this:

*“[We] applied to Centrelink and have been accepted as a “Voluntary Organisation”, which allows job network services to refer appropriate job seekers as possible volunteers to support our project”.*

### *Advertising and promotion*

Many services were increasingly employing established advertising methodologies to increase and maintain awareness about their services to young people, their families, other services and within the community. Local newspapers, newsletters, radio adverts, flyers, information leaflets, posters, and local noticeboards were all utilised, furthermore, due to encouragement from young people, newer technologies such as social networking (e.g. Facebook) were incorporated.

It was also useful for representatives of the agency to attend meetings and events to promote awareness. This not only provided learning opportunities for staff members but also enabled working relationships to be formed, promoting awareness of key issues such as the work of Reconnect, which in turn fed into improving referrals.

While some services highlighted the importance of investing in advertising in order to maintain the profile of the service, other reported mixed results. Some reported that alternative communicating methods were successful with young people and could reach wider audiences; however, others reported that devices such as flyers were not being read by target audiences meaning that resources were going to waste. Providing literature was not always believed to be the most effective methods of reaching and communicating with targets, and many reported that face-to-face consultation with clients was the most effective method of knowledge exchange.

### *Community engagement brokerage*

While it was reported that many young people were willing to make use of the opportunities available to them in their communities, many were just not aware of how they could do it. Many services identified a specific role in brokering relationships for young people with a wide range of community organisations or events. This helped to improve the social inclusion of young people encouraging better communication and social skills and helping young people to engage with other relevant groups.

Young people have become more aware of their abilities to participate in their wider communities as a result of service provider efforts, and this has helped young people to increase understanding of community connections. Young people are having more positive experiences of the partnering agencies, which has been particularly valuable for newly arrived young people. For example, it was felt that services are better able to address clients’ social needs through community engagement, for example, expanding social networks and providing awareness of community events and cultural gatherings.

In communities where Reconnect held a long standing presence, young people were more confident to engage and self-refer – therefore, this is seen as an important aspect to any service. Furthermore, community spirit has been evident throughout many of the reports with various members and organisations participating in the delivery of programs. Community assistance has been diverse with various members volunteering, donating money, providing food and refreshments and holding barbeques. In one project, local businesses contributed by identifying truants during school hours and refusing to serve those who could not present a valid school pass. Further benefits within the education sector include the Reconnect service’s ability to advocate for the young person when exclusion measures are being considered or enforced. Reconnect can liaise for better outcomes and refer the young person on to alternative education programs which can increase chances of participation, potentially providing more positive experiences of learning.

## Key Area 4: What was learnt from Applying PAR

### *Impact of PAR*

It was evident that many found engaging in the action research process to be really useful. Applying PAR was felt to provide a practical and inclusive evidence base from which current work practices could be critically examined and areas for improvement and development could be identified. It has also aided more accurate resource planning and allocation including incorporating planning and organisational time. It has provided greater understanding of and ability to manage the impacts of group delivery upon other work such as individual client work, administration and organisational requirements. It was also reported to allow workers to plan a more balanced and realistic timetable so as to minimise stress and burnout.

Some projects made specific reference to the fact that they had enhanced their approach to this issue as a direct result of applying PAR principles. Positive outcomes were noted as a consequence of this with some stating that it had led to better outcomes:

*“In order for this project to address the action research question, the program was changed from a set delivery model to a consultation based, flexible approach. This consultation approach was seen to be a major contributor to the success of the program.”*

*“[Using PAR] provided youth with the opportunity to share their ideas, design their own projects and to play a larger part throughout the whole process”*

*“[We] found action research meetings and the action research cycles provided a framework to ground workers in the research, and progressing through the research. Workers found that meetings and cycles provided a framework to ground workers in the research, and prompt their thinking and actions. This also enabled easy documentation of the research process.”*

### *Impact on practice*

Numerous reports reported that the PAR process has helped to demonstrate the flexibility of the Reconnect service. Given this adaptability, changes can, and should be made when something is seen to be out-dated, unsuitable or ineffective. This has also been realised in the course of the practical application of new interventions with the intended actions and focus often being shifted throughout. Encouragingly, this flexibility also lends itself to adapting new and established programs to work with a range of clients and needs.

Other projects go as far as to suggest radical modifications to the standard working practices in order to achieve their aim. One theme that emerged was limitations on the ability to fully engage due to the restrictions of working during normal business hours. One project cited this as a contributor to why their project had failed in its intention to improve referrals from a rural community as they could not attend community events that were mostly held at the weekend. Another project highlighted this as a key learning from their project:

*“[We] often extended work hours for community events ran on weekends to ensure community capacity building within the region, and often later afternoon visits to young people finishing school and working families. This has proven to be an effective engagement strategy to improve and develop early interventions strategies to intervene and strengthen engagement with early adolescents and their families”.*



Regarding the actual use and application of PAR there is encouraging evidence that many are adhering to the “observe, reflect, plan, act” cycle with many reviewing the progress of their project while it is ongoing and acting on the results. Encouragingly, many services depicted great aspirations for their projects and as a result of the success of programs, further programs were identified to take the work further, rolling out pilot versions to address new or wider client groups, or tweaking them to improve current delivery.

### *Continuous improvement*

With so many successes and positives being observed, it is important that this momentum is maintained. Where trials and pilot projects have been a success, there is a need to ensure that these projects are continued and potentially made permanent features of the individual Reconnect service.

As the PAR method is by its very nature an ongoing process of constantly observation and reflection on practice, learning from experiences and applying this knowledge to practice (i.e. the continuous action research spiral). The majority of research reports submitted provide evidence that this continuous cycle is being executed with many services noting that further actions are being identified and instigated as a result of the previous observations, reflections, plans and actions encompassed within the project.

Even programs that produced good results aligned with this concept of continuous improvement and identifying areas for development within piloted programs such as refining information sharing protocols and data collection methods as well as practical delivery features such as frequency and intensity of programs.

One positive outcome was that services unanimously were keen to share their experiences and achievements with other Reconnect services. With the successes of one program being noted, other agencies, regions and sectors have shown interest in adapting Reconnect programs and methods. Trials have also increased workers confidence in continuing programs with the awareness that the work being conducted is efficient and a good use of resources.





## Part 2: Recommendations to improve report writing

The previous sections demonstrate homogeneity within PAR practice for Reconnect services' as common themes were evident in chosen research questions, for strategies and approaches and to a certain extent for reported efficacies. However, greater variances could be observed within approaches to reporting PAR with significant inconsistencies and gaps in information evident in many examples.

Most notably there appears to be insufficient awareness of how to report on PAR processes succinctly, therefore, this section aims to address some of the most prevalent issues observed within this analysis. The next section also provides some 'best practice' examples in order to assist service providers in creating more concise reports to fully encompass key aspects such as approaches, strategies, outcomes and knowledge gained while utilising the PAR principles of observation, reflection, planning and action.

It is not the intention to be pedantic or prescriptive about how reports are written as it is recognised that each report is written by a different individual from a different location and should reflect the individuality of each author and the service that they provide. These points are merely being suggested as guidelines to improve the reporting and therefore potentially the value of PAR within services.

There is no optimum page length but certainly reports which were one page or less were not felt to be adequate, given that such short answers were insufficient to provide the level of detail required to gain insight into the research question and process. Conversely, it was more common for reports to be unnecessarily long. This is potentially problematic as longer reports are more time consuming and are not necessarily more informative or useful. Further to this, some reports were noted to be answering different questions with the same information or statements.

This is particularly relevant as it was also common for reports to lose focus from the main PAR question. While the cyclical nature of PAR involves evolution of research questions, frequently reports went off topic, often providing unnecessary information. This could potentially be contributing to the excessive length of many of the reports.

An interesting application of the reporting function saw services create a series of reports for the same research question or program. While this is useful in the PAR process as it represents the continuous cycle of action research, there was a concern that many authors were simply repeating the previous reports without adding further, or new, information to the project. One approach that may help to improve overall report writing is to approach the composition as if you are providing instructions to another agency that would enable them to replicate it. Given that is not useful to receive the same information twice, consideration should be given to whether there is sufficient new information available to merit an update report prior to submission.

Some reports were overly-focussed on describing the process of PAR and did not provide sufficient detail about the actual project itself. Consequently, some reports were overly hypothetical and it became difficult to discern how and why PAR principles were being applied. As PAR is about the practical application of actions based on observations and refined by reflections, it is not enough to be academic about the process if empirical evidence is not available. Many reports were vague regarding successes and effectiveness in that while they infer that the project has been effective that haven't stated what caused it to be so. It is important to define what processes were effective and why. It is also important to note that there is value in learning from approaches which have not worked or not been as successful; indeed this is a central concept within the PAR process. Therefore, authors should not feel the need to over-emphasise or demonstrate success in reports if it does not exist.

In order to address the above concerns, it is recommended that emphasis should be placed on providing succinct responses ensuring that questions have been accurately addressed. The responses should find a balance between describing the PAR process and providing an accurate account of the project methodologies and outcomes. This should include clear information why the project was chosen, who the target clients are, what the strategies and procedures are to conduct it, what it aims to achieve and how well the aims were met.

Additionally, there are potentially issues regarding the technical submission of reports to the Reconnect Online Data System (RODS), many action reports appeared to be "in progress". This potentially raises concerns that workers are unaware how to sign off properly. It is recommended that service providers should check that their AR reports which have been recorded with a status of "in progress" have not mistakenly been marked as in complete.



## Part 3: Examples of ‘best practice’

While there were many positive examples to choose from, these reports were specifically chosen for one or more of the following reasons.

1. They convey positive messages about the potential of Reconnect to instigate positive change.
2. They depict successful and effective examples of applying the PAR approach.
3. They address one or more of the common emergent themes identified within the qualitative analysis.
4. They make reference to the application of the continuous action research cycle/spiral (i.e. observing, reflecting, planning and acting).
5. They effectively include several stakeholders in the process and actively seek different perspectives.
6. They describe a transparent process.
7. The report has been well written; i.e. it is of an appropriate length and structure, also clearly providing sufficient detail of the issue.

These examples are featured in order to give an idea of some of the cases that we feel have done an exceptional job in composing reports. It is hoped that these will provide some inspiration or, at least, a talking point for Reconnect programs and service providers when considering PAR projects and reports in the future.

## Example 1: Life skills and education

**What is the name of, or short description for, this project?**

**Answer:** Wellington Breakfast Club

**What was your key action research question?**

**Answer:** How can we improve young people's school participation and attendance and educate them in the importance of breakfast and its effects on their bodies and behaviour?

**Why was this question chosen for the project?**

**Answer:** We had previously reported on the success of introducing a breakfast club to the Narromine service in improving young people engagement with education and training.

\* It was observed that some Reconnect clients in Wellington were doing poorly at school and that these young people were also not attending school on a regular basis.

\*Both the local high school and primary school were conducting breakfast clubs, and yet these clients were not attending them.

\*These young people were telling us that they were "sleeping in" as no-one at home was awake to get them off to school.

\*These young people with poor school attendance also had a family history of poor nutritional habits, were from socially isolated and disadvantaged families and had behavioural problems both at school and at home.

**What strategies did you use to explore this question?**

We talked to Reconnect clients to see if they would be interested in attending a breakfast club and for their input into how it could run to best suit their needs. We talked to their parents to see if they thought it was a good idea and give permission for their kids to attend.

We consulted with the high school with regards to how our breakfast club could be different to what they were already providing, i.e we were not duplicating a service and we wanted to target the kids who didn't make it to school to attend the school's breakfast program. We also asked for appropriate referrals.

We consulted with local dietician to provide healthy yet appetising recipe's that participants could help prepare to increase involvement. We commenced with a pilot using the already successful service model we had established in Narromine. All participants are offered a healthy breakfast and a health and fitness activity with the aim of improving concentration at school.

We also offered a group activity to improve social skills and encourage appropriate behaviour. Where participants need extra assistance, case management, counselling and/or support referrals to other services is provided and/or we take on young people as Reconnect client for case management.

**Did these strategies work well? If so, why do you think they worked well? If not, why not?**

**Answer:** Consultation with participants worked well as it provided them with input into the program and allowed them the opportunity to come up with ideas that suited their circumstances and what they wanted rather than others making decisions for them. This allowed them a sense of "ownership".

Involving parents in initial consultation has allowed for further involvement in the program, e.g. a Christmas breakfast was held for participants and family. This was well attended and has led to some parents "dropping in" to the centre and thus becoming more involved with their children.

Targeting Reconnect clients initially was successful as they were already engaged with our service, whereas participants referred by the h/school to the b/fast club rather than to Reconnect first we found was less successful as engagement/relationship with service had not been established.

School consultation has meant that our service has had an increased involvement with the high school, including further joint programs being conducted.

Young people and school relations have also seen an improvement as participants have at times asked for a youth worker to provide support/advocacy in relation to school and peer issues.

Consultation with a dietician has led to creative breakfast recipe's being a "winner" such as health shakes or smoothies and pancakes with fruit toppings. Some comments from clients have been "I never knew something healthy could be yummy too" and "This can't be good for you, 'cause it delicious".

#### **Which stakeholders, including clients, played a role in this project? How were they involved?**

**Answer:** Stakeholders have included clients, parents/caregivers and schools. Their involvement as stated above has been consultation right from the beginning. This has now moved onto on-going. Participants are involved in planning morning activities, including breakfast selection and preparation. Parents as previously stated are involved with special occasions/breakfasts. Both participants and parents are asked to fill out a questionnaire on client eating habits as a pre evaluation and then again after 6 months to help in evaluating any changes. High school is involved with referral and then are consulted if clients are experiencing issues at school. Volunteers have been recruited to help supervise and support participants. Their input and contribution is always encouraged and highly valued by our service.

PCYC has become a stakeholder by referring a client. Involvement has been the initial engagement by accompanying the young people to the breakfast club in the beginning weeks and now dropping by as a volunteer to support their referral and the breakfast club. PCYC and Reconnect also working collaboratively for youth school holiday and community activities.

#### **Outline any insights into, or changes made to, clients / service users, the service delivery model, and community capacity for early intervention.**

**Answer:** Keeping participant numbers low and engaging supportive workers and volunteers allows clients the time and opportunity to vent their emotions and in turn helps de-escalate problems. For example, one client who had been doing better at school since coming to the breakfast club was now starting to "act out". After talking with the young people, he told our worker that he had been selected to go with the cattle team to exhibit at Sydney Royal Easter Show. However, his parents couldn't afford the \$250 it would cost for the excursion. He told us that he was too embarrassed to let anyone know how poor his family was and so it was easier to act badly at school and not be allowed to go due to poor behaviour. Barnardos was able to negotiate with the school payment of the excursion with the stipulation that the young people exhibit his previous improved behaviour.

Providing transport for participants from their homes of a morning and often telephoning them beforehand so that they are ready for pick up has contributed to the high attendance rate at the breakfast club. Young people after having breakfast are then transported to school, ensuring that they pass through the front doors. This has seen a marked increase in school attendance from participants on the days they attend the breakfast club.

An unexpected result of client input into group activity has been the emergence of community spirit as participants came up with the idea of wanting to pick rubbish up from the skate park as part of their morning activity.

**What actions were taken and / or proposed as a result of this project?**

**Answer:** Barnardos Families NSW program has provided money to employ our Breakfast club co-ordinator for another 6hrs per week, thus allowing for the breakfast club to operate in total 5 mornings a week and to enable younger participants of primary school age ( many of whom are siblings of Reconnect clients) can also participate. Barnardos applied to Centrelink and has been accepted as a “Voluntary Organisation”, which allows job network services to refer appropriate job seekers as possible volunteers to support the breakfast club.

**What are the key learnings you would share with other Reconnect providers?**

**Answer:** If special focus is given to getting at risk young people to school it can increase school attendance, increase concentration at school and thereby improve academic achievements and in turn decrease school suspensions.

Breakfast club can also provide a venue for participants to learn a range of living skills e.g. food preparation, hygiene and cleaning, recycling, team work, sharing, tolerance and respect.

## Example 2: Cultural and diversity work

**What is the name of, or short description for, this project?**

**Answer:** Delivering group session for newly arrived young people

**What was your key action research question?**

**Answer:** How do our clients feel and what kind of experience do they have in the transition to Australia?

**Why was this question chosen for the project?**

**Answer:** Often we encounter that newly arrived young people are experiencing cultural shock when they arrive in Australia. Most of their issues come from the language barrier, lack of social support, family conflict due to the change in the family structure as well as a change in their role in society. Studies show that many families face with inter-generational problems, meaning that while parents expect their children to follow traditional values and roles, young people feel pressure from friends and the new cultural context to integrate Australian (or western) values and roles. If young people want to settle in Australia it is essential for them to learn the new language and culture; however, parents may fear that this will result in losing the tradition of the home country. This conflict may lead to mental health problems, isolation, continuous arguments, frustration and family breakdown. Most commonly, refugee parents are stricter about the children’s free time, socialising with friends and how to spend time at home. Young clients see that many Australian children of the same age are living in more freedom. This results in dissatisfaction and confusion. In many cases clients feel that nobody understands them and that the only way out is to move out from home. The lack of communication between the children and parents increases tension and feeling of loneliness.



During the support we provide we generally focus on the issues in regards to homelessness. This time we aimed at the clients' personal feelings in order to see their lives, dreams and feelings from a different angle. As Youth and Family Workers we can see that the issue of homelessness is just a small part of the problem as they are facing many other difficulties such as homesickness, language barriers, missing relatives and friends, etc. We wanted to explore further more about their emotional well-being in order to provide more support.

#### **What strategies did you use to explore this question?**

**Answer:** Group sessions for newly arrived young people would enable them to explore the challenges, the experience and other people's solutions, which could help them see that they are not alone with a problem. Through talking, young people share their stories.

The following strategies would be used:

Choose the dates for the last week of school term 2 after the exams so they can be relaxed for our session. We approached the Head of the ESL unit at the school in order to gain approval for the venue, the number and names of the students and the appropriate dates and times to hold the group activity as well as giving a reminder to the students before the event.

We selected the participants by consulting with the relevant persons from the school and choosing those we thought would happily take this role voluntarily. We created the questionnaire around our desired outcome which was to achieve an insight into how our clients felt, being newly arrived young people. The questions were also focusing on their future plans.

Creating a safe environment for the participants by ensuring that nobody is going to judge what they say or feel. Facilitation of the group session, discussion.

In order to provide a more casual and comfortable environment, food and drink were provided and those participants who wanted to talk to each other could have the privacy and opportunity.

#### **Did these strategies work well? If so, why do you think they worked well? If not, why not?**

**Answer:** Most of the strategies worked well although we faced some difficulties too. The methods used to conduct the group activity were successful as we work cooperatively with the school staff and the clients. This initiated a reciprocal relationship and enabled us to engage with the clients further. Our communication strategies enabled efficient and effective rapport building not only between us and the clients, but amongst the group as well. It developed in an open and trusting environment where participants felt comfortable enough to disclose information and show positive interactions. Everyone acted cooperatively during this group activity.

The facilitation strategy worked well in accompanying the participants to grasp a better understanding of the activity and what is being asked of them. The length of the questionnaire worked well regarding the length and proportion of it; however the examples that were used in some cases and needed further explanation. In the future this should be done before we start the session. The preparation relating to the venue, food and drinks achieved a relaxed and good atmosphere for the participants to enjoy.

The timing strategy was challenging and partially unsuccessful as our first strategy to conduct the activity after school wasn't welcomed because the students wanted to go home or were already occupied. As a result we had to compensate which led to our second strategy concluding being held in lunch time. Choosing the last week before the holidays didn't result in the desired outcome due to many students not coming to the last week of school or were away on school excursions.

**Which stakeholders, including clients, played a role in this project? How were they involved?**

**Answer:** The school provided us with the venue. We approached the head of the ESL unit in order to discuss the process of the group activity as well as to let her know about the students who we chose to involve. She welcomed the idea of our group session and also provided useful information about the school programs and picked the two most suitable days for the last week. Unfortunately though she was not able to confirm if the students will attend school on those particular days.

Our clients played the most important role in this action research as they were the participants for the questionnaire. We went to the school to inform the students about our plans for a group activity as well as asked them whether they would be happy to participate voluntarily. They were told that food and drinks will be provided on the day so they don't need to bring their lunch. The Teacher Aids also provided some assistance by reminding the students 2 days prior to the group activity.

**Outline any insights into, or changes made to, clients / service users, the service delivery model, and community capacity for early intervention.**

**Answer:** The newly created activity gave us a further insight and better understanding of our clients which cause us to examine where our service delivery could improve or where it is already effective and how it can be maintained. Through the questionnaire we achieved insight into the clients' future ambitions that indicated to us that they all have plans for the future such as finishing high school with good marks, go to TAFE or university and continuing to progress in their lives. We also learned that they have inspiration to work and ideas of who they want to become. It also helped us to perceive a further outlook regarding to the young people's emotional well-being and personal issues allowing us to recognise and accommodate for a more sensitive and culturally appropriate service delivery. Many of them seemed happier since their transition to Australia, but still they miss their relatives and aspects from home.

The majority of the participants informed us that they feel more independent than what they used to be and showed authority in making their own decisions. Those who are unaccompanied Humanitarian Minors expressed strong connection with their family members left behind and wished to be reunited with the family.

**What actions were taken and / or proposed as a result of this project?**

**Answer:** Our results encouraged us to improve our service delivery to benefit the needs of our clients towards their lack of social well-being, through engaging them with their community via informing them of community events and cultural gatherings.

We concluded from the feedback from the participants that there is an interest for further group activities. In these group activities we would like to include the Tree of Life project which was conceived through a recent workshop that we attended. The Tree of Life is based on narrative therapy that promotes rich story development of values and was developed as a tool for working with children who had experienced loss and trauma. It is suitable for use in schools, community and family settings.

Taking into account the findings regarding to the young people's emotional well-being we would like to organise an information session on mental health in the school potentially with the cooperation of other agencies. The objectives we would aim for is to provide relevant information about different types of mental health issues as well as where to seek assistance and support. Our clients, as they are newly arrived young people, are vulnerable and experiencing difficulties in settling in Australia, which increases the chance of having physical and emotional problems. Therefore this information session would provide them with some reassurance of acceptance and awareness.

**What are the key learnings you would share with other Reconnect providers?**

**Answer:** The importance of creating new strategies to further explore how newly arrived young people feel about moving to a different country and other aspects involved in their lives. This would help the Reconnect providers to better assist the clients' needs, provide better support and acknowledge other areas of their lives. The importance of developing and maintaining effective communication between team members including sharing ideas and discussing options.

Methods used to have efficient rapport between worker and client in order to maintain a trust-based relationship so the young people are able to open up and express their feelings in more depths. This way us - service providers - can better meet the needs of our clients and their families.

### Example 3: Community engagement

**What is the name of, or short description for, this project?**

**Answer :** Thursday Night Live

**What was your key action research question?**

**Answer:** What would it take to engage young people in harm minimisation strategies in Rural/Remote communities? Including self harm, drug use etc.

**Why was this question chosen for the project?**

**Answer:** This question was identified due to a gap in service provision for the youth in the Mount Isa community. Members of the police force identified emerging trends of risky behaviour occurring with young people on Thursday Nights in the local shopping precinct. These risky behaviours included volatile substance misuse, fighting and stealing. Youth workers from government and non-government organisations proposed that this need in our community could be addressed through diversionary activities on a Thursday Night that would aim to reduce the number of youth engaging in risky behaviours in the Central Business District (CBD).

Due to the community need, youth workers from Young People Ahead and Reconnect developed alternate activities close to the shopping centre to entice youth not to participate in risky behaviours. Based on the total number of police call outs and reports from shop keepers and youth workers these activities were successful in reducing volatile substance misuse and crime behaviours. However, new problems emerged in relation to ball sports being played near a car park and youth still having access to the darkened areas of the shopping centre car park to engage in risky behaviour.

Youth Workers then liaised with the PCYC to organise the Thursday Night activities to be held at the PCYC. At first youth workers provided transport from the CBD to the PCYC in order to move the groups of young people. However over time young people began to walk to the PCYC of their own accord and therefore transport to the venue is no longer required.

### **What strategies did you use to explore this question?**

**Answer:** Evaluation of the event was conducted from multiple sources, these included:

- Feedback from young people. This was done directly through questionnaires which were distributed fortnightly. Indirectly through observation of young people having a good time and through recording an increase in the number of young people attending. Currently the event has over 100 young people attending each fortnight.
- Feedback from shop keepers. Each fortnight a member of the police and a youth worker visit the CBD and discuss with shop keepers any changes they have noticed in the behaviour of young people. When Thursday Night Live is on shopkeepers report a reduction in the number of youth “hanging out” in the shopping centre and state that it is very quiet compared with non- Thursday Night Live weeks. A questionnaire was also provided to the chamber of commerce with the aim that they would distribute the questionnaire to shopkeepers in order to obtain broader feedback. The chamber of commerce could not provide this service.
- Police feedback - Members of the Police force are involved in monthly Mount Isa Substance Misuse Action Group (MISMAG) meetings. During these meetings members of the police have reported a reduction in the number of call outs to the CBD on Thursdays when Thursday Night Live is held compared to weeks when Thursday Night Live is not being held.
- Feedback from Youth Related Agencies - The increased participation by a broader range of youth-related agencies demonstrates the effectiveness of the activity.

### **Did these strategies work well? If so, why do you think they worked well? If not, why not?\***

**Answer:** The strategies that worked well included the questionnaires to young people which provided good feedback on what activities should continue and what activities should begin being rotated. This questionnaire also asked young people what they would be doing if they were not at Thursday Night Live to which many young people answered ‘nothing’ therefore demonstrating a good diversionary activity. Another strategy that was effective was recording the number of young people attending and some of their demographic details. This has allowed us to see not only a steady increase in total numbers since the beginning of Thursday Night Live but also an increase in the diversity of young people attending. At the beginning of Thursday Night Live it was mainly Outer Circle Young People attending each fortnight and although these same faces continue to present each fortnight we have also recorded an increase in young people from the local high school attending Thursday Night Live.

A strategy that was not as effective was questionnaires to shop keepers. These were given to the Chamber of Commerce with the request they distribute these to shop owners however, this request could not be completed. In the initial stages of Thursday Night Live the responsibility of planning and supervising Thursday Night Live fell to a small group of agencies. In the beginning, other youth agencies were inconsistent in their support mainly due to a lack of flexibility of some organisations to allow workers to work outside of traditional business hours. This has changed since early 2010 as many workers see the benefit of meeting with clients in a stress free environment and the benefit this can have on rapport with clients. Agency support has increased; however, some individuals are still required to volunteer their time due to inflexibility within some workplaces.

**Which stakeholders, including clients, played a role in this project? How were they involved?**

**Answer:** Queensland Police Service, Police Liason Officers, Police Citizens Youth Club (PCYC), Young People Ahead, Centacare Reconnect, Department of Youth Justice, Rotary.

**Outline any insights into, or changes made to, clients / service users, the service delivery model, and community capacity for early intervention.**

**Answer:** Through Thursday Night Live numerous insights have been made into early intervention and this has led to changes in service delivery not only from the Reconnect service but also from other key youth stakeholders in the community. Thursday Night Live has enabled young people to become more familiar and more comfortable with the Reconnect workers. It has enabled the Reconnect workers to develop relationships with a broader group of young people who may be at risk. Thursday Night Live has especially helped Reconnect workers to build relationships with hard to engage young people as the environment is stress-free and non-threatening. Once relationships are developed in this environment, young people to feel more comfortable visiting workers at the Reconnect room at other times.

Thursday Night Live has facilitated stronger relationships among youth service providers. A more collaborative approach to working with young people can lead to better outcomes, as service providers know what other services offer and when they can refer young people to other services. Better relationships between youth service providers also enables workers to identify gaps in service delivery which remain in the Mount Isa community.

Thursday Night Live has highlighted the need for assertive outreach especially outside traditional business hours. In the Mount Isa community activities for youth outside traditional business hours are limited. Many young people have reported that boredom leads to participation in risky behaviours. Thursday Night Live has highlighted the need in our community for a safe place for young people to go that does not close at 5pm. Youth agencies in town are now rallying for a 24-hour “Youth Hub” which could provide diversionary activities and also assistance to youth in need for flexible hours.

**What actions were taken and / or proposed as a result of this project?**

**Answer:** Since establishing the successful Thursday Night Live project many actions have been proposed. These include Thursday Night Live becoming a permanent activity on the youth calendar. A separate working group has been established to plan and run Thursday Night Live in order to continue the momentum of the activity.

Whole of community participation has increased since the initiation of Thursday Night Live. There has been increase participation of Government agencies including the Department of Youth Justice in the event. This has enabled a strengthening of relationships between government and non-government workers. Other community agencies have also come on board including Rotary who provide a BBQ each fortnight to feed all the young people. Local businesses have also become involved in the event through donations of food and goods. One example is the Lambert’s business, a local fruit and vegetable distributor, who donates fruit and vegetables on a regular basis.

Data indicates increased numbers of young people attending and the effectiveness of the diversionary activity. Funding has been obtained to enable the continued purchasing of resources. Prior to funding being obtained, the financial burden of Thursday Night Live fell onto various youth organisation each fortnight. Since identifying the need for increased after hours activities for the youth in Mount Isa there has been increased focus on obtaining a 24-hours activities for the youth in Mount Isa there has been increased focus on obtaining a 24-hour “Youth Hub”. Although this is still in it’s early stages of planning and lobbying this can be seen as a result of Thursday Night Live.

**What are the key learnings you would share with other Reconnect providers?\***

**Answer:** The primary key learning which could be passed onto other Reconnect Service providers is to work with other youth organisations to identify a true need in the community. Once a need has been established it is important to work collaboratively with the other youth organisations to fill this gap. Thursday Night Live would not have been as successful without collaboration, consistency and persistence. It was important to use a gradual process of building up an activity of this scale. A great deal of time was spent laying the foundations and completing the ground work for Thursday Night Live before beginning. This was demonstrated by first providing activities in a central location, then moving the activity but providing transport and then finally transport was no longer provided as young people would make their own way to Thursday Night Live.

Finally it is important to consult with young people throughout the process, both formally as in a questionnaires and recording headcounts of total numbers of young people and informally as in conversations with young people and watching what activities are popular and what activities were not popular.

## Example 4: Leadership initiatives

**What is the name of, or short description for, this project?**

**Answer:** Sleepout collective

**What was your key action research question?**

**Answer:** What would it take to increase young peoples' participation in the Sleepout event for 2011

**Why was this question chosen for the project?**

**Answer:** During the planning of the last youth homelessness sleep out in 2010, some young people were engaged towards the end, however there wasn't as much participation by young people as expected. Staff were unsure whether they had employed the best methods to engage young people in the planning & implementation of the project.

Although a few young people engaged to be MCs and contribute to the planning, it was believed that more young people may be involved for a number of different tasks. The aim would be to assist young people gain more skills in planning, delivery and evaluation of events.

**What strategies did you use to explore this question?**

**Answer:** It was decided to try to form a collective to encourage youth participation and raise awareness of youth homelessness as a direct result of a 'Sleep out' that the services participated in last financial year. Discussions were held with this group about how they saw young people becoming engaged in the process.

Discussions were held with staff about what their views on youth participation and engaging young people in planning processes were. Some future focussed discussions explored how staff wanted it to look like with young people and how they thought we could get to a more engaging process for the sleep out event 2011.

A Projects Manager was employed at Anglicare across the youth programs to support group and events work, giving focus to many of the events happening and skilling up staff to support young people more effectively.

Young people were supported to learn new skills in planning, organising, implementing and evaluating, and all of the micro skills required to pull together a large event, such as who to contact and how to talk to them about what is required, clarifying plans and feeding into broader systems and organisations.

Services working together to support the young people to be involved in the collective. Having regular planning meetings with young people and workers, and celebrating achievements along the way. Supporting young people to perform a skit at the NT homelessness Summit. Supporting young people to engage with the media about homelessness in Darwin.

**Did these strategies work well? If so, why do you think they worked well? If not, why not?**

**Answer:** The services working together were all on the same page, supporting each other and young people in a positive way. The collective was a useful way for young people to participate in meaningful change and action.

Young people were keen to provide insight into ways they believed would be useful in engaging other young people.

Working out how the team saw the future of youth participation was an important step in the process as everyone wanted for things to be better.

The Projects Manager was invaluable in being the ongoing contact for young people. This ensured that when client work seemed to dominate the workload, that young people on the collective didn't get pushed to the end of the priority list. The Projects Manager supported Connect staff to assist young people with tasks and maintain linkages with other service providers.

Young people participated really well in learning new skills and practising some more honed artistic skills and talents. A little mentoring went a long way to support some participants to drive the direction of the sleep out 2011. Young people could participate as much or as little as they wanted to, based on their time available and connection to the project.

Young people responded really well to celebrating the achievements along the way. Young people presented a 5 minute skit at NT Homelessness Summit, with the group 'bricks without straws' following on with a drumming and musical performance creating positive media about homelessness and homeless people. From the performance NT shelter has built a connection between the sleep out collective and is considering asking the young people to perform again.

Young people have been learning new skills in managing the media and addressing forums of professional people.

**Which stakeholders, including clients, played a role in this project? How were they involved?**

**Answer:** 10 Young people provided great ideas, performed and contributed to planning processes in the lead up to Sleep Out 2011 which takes place on August 5th.

Service providers supported young people and each other YWCA of Darwin youth homelessness services were the major partnering organisation of this event for the 2nd year running.

Melaleuca NAYSS service, DAISY Catholic Care (AOD service for young people 12-25), Young Person's Collective, Darwin Connect, Anglicare NT Projects Manager supported the collective and Connect staff from April 2011.

**Outline any insights into, or changes made to, clients / service users, the service delivery model, and community capacity for early intervention.**

**Answer:** Young people felt empowered & felt they were listened to, they had the ability to express themselves in the way they wanted to. This has given workers the encouragement and confidence to engage young people in this way and to utilise young peoples' strengths to be involved in the way they want to be in major events and planning processes.

Young people suggested using Facebook more to promote this event and others. The event went up on another organisation Facebook page, however Anglicare doesn't have one to promote events as yet. The organisation is engaging in these processes.

Young people reported that they felt a lot more confident to discuss issues about homelessness with service providers, the media and the broader community.

Having a designated 'Projects' Manager assisted the project in a critical time as the event became closer. This ensured that staff were able to maintain focus while the projects manager pulled the smaller detail together to make the space for young people to participate in a busy office environment. This project is being used as an example of how useful and sustainable the position is as it assists so many of our projects in similar ways.

The longer term relationships that Anglicare NT has with services that have been on the reference groups for Reconnect, supported the agency to commence various projects and supported us when there have been major staffing shortages continue to support the types of events that draw young people to participate and encourage staff to work collaboratively. This project was a good reminder that it is so important to continue to make time to work well with solid agencies such as the YWCA of Darwin.

**What actions were taken and / or proposed as a result of this project?**

**Answer:** Young people were well versed to address the media, spoke at various events and committed to the annual event. This project has shown other projects how easy it can be to engage young people in planning processes and highlights the importance of having young people participate on a number of different levels.

The projects manager role will continue to support and mentor Reconnect staff to engage young people in the service in meaningful ways in a variety of contexts. It has reminded staff and shown to new staff that contributing to the service can happen in more ways than through client feedback forms and that engaging young people in positive social change and awareness-raising about issues that are important to individuals can build self-esteem and confidence in ways that direct client work cannot. Staff have committed to informing young people of upcoming ways they can be involved in Anglicare NT youth services across the board, as it may be more appealing to become involved in a program where they have not been directly involved. The partnering organisations have committed to continued support of this and other events within Darwin.



**What are the key learnings you would share with other Reconnect providers?**

**Answer:** Young people continue to hold the most important information about how to talk with them, whether that be through face to face meetings, text messages or phone calls. Everyone suggested we use Facebook as a medium to communicate with other young people. This has meant the organisation as a whole has had to jump on quickly to come up with a risk management plan, policies and procedures to keep young people safe on line and understanding the boundaries of social media in these processes.

Even when staff are unsure whether they can engage young people there are ways to get them involved and active.

It's important to not become complacent about youth participation, sometimes long term staff require an injection of a new staff member or a new position to build confidence and try new things when working with young people. Each new staff member comes with a different level of experience in engaging young people in planning processes.

## Example 5: Good practice principals

**What is the name of, or short description for, this project?**

**Answer :** What can we do to build the sustainability of our service?

**What was your key action research question?**

**Answer:** What can we do to build the sustainability of our service?

**Why was this question chosen for the project?**

**Answer:** PLAN

Reconnect has been operational for 5 years and over the last 12 months we had reached capacity working with young people and their families. The program did not have a clear plan in place for how the program would respond.

\* Staff wanted clear direction and plans on what needed to happen now the program had reached capacity.

\* Reconnect works in the community to make inter-services linkages with other community and government agencies and the program needed to develop clear pathways for young people requesting a service when the program reached capacity.

\*The perception of our community partners is important to the Reconnect program and any changes to our work practices require time to explore reflect and consult with relevant stakeholders.

\* The Reconnect team wanted to explore/ review the intake, assessment and referral process of the program and make changes if necessary to ensure young people and their families have clear process/ pathways when the program reached capacity.

\* Explore the establishment of a waiting list if deemed appropriate.

\* Is there other Reconnect programs operating at capacity? If so what strategies do they use to manage this?

### **What strategies did you use to explore this question?**

**Answer:** REFLECT

The Reconnect team reflected on the work we have done to date on this question. We came up the following points to consider further:

1. Reviewed the current processes around intake, assessment and referral for the program
2. What work is the program completing with young people and families and community?
3. Explored the amount of group work the program is completing within the school setting, is there another program that could complete this work
4. Discuss with funders what strategies other programs have used when they have reached capacity.

### **Did these strategies work well? If so, why do you think they worked well? If not, why not?**

**Answer:** REVIEW OF CURRENT PROCESSES AROUND INTAKE, ASSESSMENT AND REFERRALS

The team had several discussions around our current intake, assessment and referrals, explored other Reconnect programs process and reviewed and changed the current intake and assessment and referrals for the Reconnect program. The team decided to “trail” the new intake, assessment and referral for 3 months and seek feedback and make changes as required. The program believed this work well, due to the fact that we consulted young people, families and key stakeholders as well as other Reconnect programs. Another factor that works well was our ability to be flexible and reviewed the new process regularly and made changes as required.

#### **LOOK AT THE WORK PRACTICE OF THE PROGRAM:**

During regular case reviews (completed as a team) we looked at “could we do this differently?”, and if so will this change create space to take on other families?

This is a standard practice of the program, and feedback from the team has been positive, and allows case workers to explore and develop new skills, as well as using the team to find solutions to issues facing young people and their families.

#### **GROUP WORK:**

This Reconnect program has developed strong connections with local schools and run many programs within the Education system. As a direct result of reaching capacity Reconnect decreased the amount of group work that is completed in the school. The Youth Connection program has been operating in Dubbo for the past 6 month and part of their funding is to engage young people within the education system, it is the belief of the Reconnect program that the Youth Connection program is able to develop and run groups within the education system. If there is an opportunity to co-facilitate groups with Youth Connections in the future this would be a better use of resources. This strategy worked as it made us reflect and explore different approaches to our current work practices. Group work has been aimed at young people that are at risk of becoming homeless and disengaging from school and it’s the opinion of the Reconnect program that Youth Connection is better position to complete this work. This decision helps to ensure that duplication of services or “over servicing” does not occur and the Reconnect resources are targeted more at case management around families’ issues which will continue to include mediation and counselling referrals. There have been discussions around mediation and counselling training being offered to team members, due to the lack of referral options within Dubbo.

Discuss with funders what strategies other programs have used when they have reached capacity. Discussed with funders our capacity and seek guidance and strategies to manage when the program has reached capacity. This was very useful as the Dubbo Reconnect is not the only service that has reached capacity and the funders was able to provide strategies that other Reconnect programs have used successfully. The funders were able to give Reconnect email address of other programs that have reached capacity and being able to have conversation with these programs has been useful, sometimes knowing what doesn't work is helpful.

Why do you we think they worked well? Time and preparation for meetings was a factor that assisted the process to be successful.

### **Which stakeholders, including clients, played a role in this project? How were they involved?**

**Answer:** All Reconnect team members, young people and parents, and government and non – government agencies:

#### **TEAM MEMBERS:**

The team was involved in discussion around what works well and if you could change any practice within the program what would that be? The team also reviewed the program intake, assessment and referral process, looked at what worked well in other Reconnect and young people focused programs. As the result of this review a new process was developed to ensure that young people and families most in need are able to access to the program in a timely manner. The assessment of need was changed significantly and this has allowed the team to obtain a clear picture of the family issues that has resulted into a referral into the Reconnect program. The team “trailed” the new process and gained feedback from young people, parents, and Government and non-Government agencies

#### **YOUNG PEOPLE:**

As part of the review of the process young people were consulted on the changes and provided feedback to workers on their thoughts regarding the new intake process.

#### **PARENTS:**

Parents were consulted on the changes and provided feedback on the process, one positive feedback that staff get back to them in a timely manner and they are clear about what needs to happen during intake and assessment phase.

#### **GOVERNMENT AND NON-GOVERNMENT AGENCIES:**

This has allowed the Reconnect team an opportunity to discuss changes to our intake, assessment and referral process, and what will happen when we reach capacity. We have received feedback from the “first to know” agencies in particular Centrelink regarding the “advice to Centrelink form” and timeframe for completion. The program was able to change the intake process to accommodate Centrelink requirements.

### **Outline any insights into, or changes made to, clients / service users, the service delivery model, and community capacity for early intervention and what actions were taken and / or proposed as a result of this project?**

**Answer:** Outline any insights into, or changes made to, clients / service users, the service delivery model, and community capacity for early intervention. As stated earlier in the report, the team reviewed at all areas of service provision and the service delivery model. The changes make to the Service model are:

**INTAKE:** the team looked at how we completed intake, what information we gathered to make and assessment on young person's eligibility to gain a service from Reconnect.

#### ASSESSMENT:

as well as the initial assessment that is completed at intake there is an ongoing assessment to look at the needs of the young person and their family, prior to the development of a case plan. This is a new concept for the Reconnect team; however this has been a useful way of gathering additional information that will assist workers, young people and their family to identify and prioritise need.

#### REFERRAL:

while this remain the same, due to the additional information gathered at the assessment phase referrals are often make early in the planning with young people and their family.

#### GROUPWORK:

The program facilitated many different groups within the Education system, aimed at prevention of young people disengaging with the Education system, and becoming at risk of homeless. Given the Youth Connection Program has commenced in Dubbo , and group work with young people at risk of disengaging with the Education system is part of their funding agreement, it would appear that this program would be suitable to facilitate, and in fact have started to facilitate groups within the Education system . This has given Reconnect more time to focus on individual young people and their family with the focus on meditation and counselling to assist with relationship issues. It is hopeful and expected that young people and their family time with Reconnect will decrease due to the change in work practices.

#### LOOK AT THE WORK PRACTICE OF THE PROGRAM:

During regular case reviews (completed as a team) we looked at “could we do this differently?”, and if so will this change create space to take on other families? This is a standard practice of the program, and feedback from the team has been positive, and allows case workers to explore and develop new skills, as well as using the team to find solutions to issues facing young people and their families.

This process will continue to be reviewed/ changed based on the needs of the young people, and their family and available resources.

#### What are the key learnings you would share with other Reconnect providers?

**Answer:** That the AR is a process that can take you in very different directions. Dubbo Reconnect starting out thinking about establishing a waiting list once the program had reached capacity and ended up making changes to the intake, assessment and referral process. I think it is important to look “outside your area/square” for solutions and not be frighten to change and review and change until you and others you have consulted are happy with the outcome. It’s important to have a plan and time to reflect on what to we are wanting to achieve.

## Example 6: Employment

#### What is the name of, or short description for, this project?

**Answer :** Starwood Hotels and Resorts EAT, WORK, TALK program forms a part of the company’s overall Corporate Citizenship Initiative. Run at property level these programs allows hotel professionals to engage with a variety of audiences to share key nutritional, budgeting, job related presentation skills and provide an insight into the hospitality industry as a valid area of employment

#### What was your key action research question?

**Answer :** What would it take to improve young people’s engagement with employment?

**Why was this question chosen for the project?**

**Answer :** The question was chosen in order to look at improving young people's access, job readiness and engagement with employment and to improve stability and long-term engagement in that young person's life?

**What strategies did you use to explore this question?**

**Answer :** Barnardos established a partnership with the global hotel chain Starwood Hotels and Resorts and worked with the Sheraton on the Park hotel to develop a project where young people from the Canterbury/Marrickville Reconnect program could access work related skills, practical pre-employment experience and undertake in a work placement at the Sheraton on the Park hotel in Sydney. Barnardos and Sheraton on the Park work in close partnership, actively supporting the young person from initial referral of a young person, resume preparation, through the interviewing processes as well as while the young person is on work placement. This supportive environment allows the young person to learn all skills required when applying for employment, improving their job readiness while giving them practical work experience in a five star hotel environment that is highly regarded within the hospitality industry, as well as other fields of employment. Barnardos and Sheraton on the Park are able to effectively support the young person in their challenges to overcome existing boundaries they have which is affecting their ability to access employment. Depending on the young person's placement and personal goals there is also the possibility for future paid employment within this large hotel chain. Sheraton on the Park can also act as a telephone reference for young people who have participated in this project. Greater access to employment can provide long term stability in a young person's life and improve their ability to provide themselves with resources such as housing.

**Did these strategies work well? If so, why do you think they worked well? If not, why not?**

**Answer :** We have had several young people successfully complete this project with two young people receiving paid employment as Apprentice Chefs. Those who did not wish to continue with employment at Sheraton on the Park have gained practical skills to assist in future employment opportunities as well as a phone reference from a highly regarded employer. While the young people were on placement Barnardos staff visited the young people to support them in their placement as well as address any issues. In cases where Sheraton on the Park had some issues with our young people they were able to contact Barnardos Reconnect staff and overcome the issue quickly and effectively, allowing the young person to continue their placement and overcome their challenges. The initial engagement Barnardos had with Sheraton on the Park staff was effective in allowing hotel staff to work and support our client group with their personal challenges and barriers while undertaking their placement. This is an ongoing project between the two organisations that we can refer young people to at any time. All young people felt comfortable and supported by the Sheraton on the Park staff when dealing with them, having this opportunity has also lifted the client's self-esteem and increased their self-belief.

**Which stakeholders, including clients, played a role in this project? How were they involved?**

**Answer :** Sheraton on the Park, a part of Starwood Hotels and Resorts created the program and approached Barnardo's to be partner in the program , staff from both these organisations continue to be heavily involved in supporting the young people who engage in the project as well as reviewing its effectiveness and in overcoming any challenges. Barnardos nominated and referred young people who were suitable for the project. It is the clients of Barnardos Reconnect who participated in the project.

**Outline any insights into, or changes made to, clients / service users, the service delivery model, and community capacity for early intervention**

**Answer :** There is a noticeable change in the young people who have participated in this project; they have an improved sense of self-belief and self-esteem. They have the ability to test out different hospitality roles in a supportive environment and learn practical skills that they can use for the rest of their lives. Clients were given access to employment and learning opportunities where they normally would not. Two clients were able to attain a three year traineeship as an apprentice Chef at a five star hotel which will allow for more opportunities in his career development and has secured him employment in an organisation that is normally difficult to gain employment at.

This partnership has provided benefit two fold and has also assisted associates at Sheraton on the Park develop a further awareness and understanding for marginalised groups in the community (Barnardos reconnect client group) and how best to support and overcome issues they face concerning employment. This project is ongoing that is available to many young people and will continue to develop to assist the needs of this 'at risk' group of young people. This employment development and opportunity for our young people has long term implications in assisting greater skills and long term employment stability to improve the client's quality of life and reduce the likelihood of them not being able to source accommodation in the long term.

**What actions were taken and / or proposed as a result of this project?**

**Answer :** This project is ongoing and it continues to prove to be a success in providing opportunities and access to employment for our client group who usually have various employment barriers and are usually marginalised from employment. There is a possibility in the future to further develop this partnership to run workshops for clients in interviewing and practical job seeking skills with the aim to improve their access to employment; these workshops would be for those young people not suitable for work placements at Sheraton on the Park.

**What are the key learnings you would share with other Reconnect providers?**

**Answer :** Community partnership with organisations such as Starwood Hotels and Resorts can provide opportunities for our clients that would not normally exist and effectively break down access barriers that our clients are faced with, in areas such as employment. Such opportunities provide long-term skills and direct employment training for our clients as well as providing them with an opportunity in a supportive environment to improve their self-belief and self-esteem as a result of engaging in such a program. Clients are more likely to engage in projects where they are able to identify direct outcomes; such as paid employment at the hotel or one of the other hotels in its chain.



# Reconnect

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For Young People and their Families