



Skills Learnt in Youth Work Practice Necessary for the Digital Age: A Qualitative Study of NEET Youth

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ABSTRACT

Not in education, employment and not in training (NEET) youth as vulnerable groups need to learn and relearn new set of skills needed for the digital age since traditional jobs will be replaced with new jobs that will demand a new set of skills. The study aims to explore the perspectives of NEET youth on the skills they had learnt in youth work practices that are necessary for the digital age. A qualitative approach was employed to guide the gathering and analysis of the data. Some of the skills learnt in youth work practices include business acuity, digital skills, active citizens, and teamwork skill. To improve youth work practices in the digital age, this study recommends that youth workers need to have intensive knowledge so they can implement youth work activities effectively and improve the outcomes of NEET youth in the digital age.

KEYWORDS

Digital age; NEET youth; youth work practice; youth workers; skills.

INTRODUCTION

The digital age has renewed interest in the importance of learning among young people, and professionals (Schwab, 2016). The digital age is facilitating the process of learning outside the classroom across the globe (Horrigan, 2016). Rapid changes in technology make learning essential for people, particularly the NEET youth (Kaplan, 2016). Developing countries are struggling to ensure that the NEET youth participate in the digital society (Matli & Ngoepe, 2021). NEET youth are youths between the ages of 18-24 years old not in employment, not in education, or not in training. The NEET youth rate in South Africa has been consistently over 30% during the last few years. A large proportion of the NEET youth in the digital age in South Africa has been searching for work without finding one (Mudiriza & De Lannoy, 2022). Thus, over 3.5 million (34.3% of all youth) are not in education, employment, or training (NEET) in South Africa (Statistics South Africa, 2022). According to the United Nations (2022) the increased number of NEET youth in South Africa indicates that the government has failed to meet the target of the 2015 Sustainable Development Goals (SDGs) number 8, Target 8.6, of substantially reducing the proportion of the NEET youth by 2020. In comparison to Uganda, South Africa has been making notable strides in addressing the elevated rate of NEET (Not in Education, Employment, or Training) youth. Meanwhile, in Uganda, the challenges persist for NEET youth who face difficulties securing improved employment opportunities. Recent statistics reveal that a significant 90% of them rely on the informal sector for their livelihood (Chen & Carré, 2020). Youth policy makers stress that the NEET youth lack the necessary knowledge and skills that will enable them to participate in the labour market, particularly in the era of the fourth industrial revolution (Kovacheva et al., 2019).

Digital literacy skills are important for NEET youth in the digital age (Matli & Ngoepe, 2020; Ngoepe & Matli, 2022). Thus, jobs that will be created in the future will require an advanced level of digital skills. Therefore, it is important to expose the youth to the digital skills development program in youth development initiatives (Neagu et al., 2021). With the emergence of the industrial revolution as indicated by Raselekoane (2019) parents were taken to work and left their children at home alone or with tired grandparents. This breeds complex challenges for young people such as school drops and anti-social behaviour. These complex challenges led to the start of youth work practice with the sole purpose of arresting the unfolding unpalatable situation that was hindering young people's developmental needs.

Youth work is a rights-based youth engagement approach that build young people's personal development while supporting their social, political and economic empowerment (Council of the European Union, 2017). Youth work is implemented in a voluntary setting by youth workers with or no formal education in youth work (Darley-Nolan, 2015). In addition, youth work is a crucial instrument for young adults since it offers a powerful space for continuous learning. Youth work practice occurs within a theoretical framework of non-formal education which compliments the work that is done in formal education (Hlagala, 2012). According to Borden et al. (2016), youth work practice plays an important role in its promotion

of social capital-related learning due to its ability in increasing positive health attitudes among the youth. Youth work is known as voluntary activities that take place in the street, in community centers, and in youth clubs that promote the social and economic inclusion of young people (Brady et al., 2020). Youth work practices that is rendered by professional youth workers in partnership with adult volunteers, provide a variety of non-formal education programmes to the vulnerable youth in order to address their personal and economic needs (Brady & Redmond, 2017). Hill (2020) explores youth work practices, encompassing a spectrum of voluntary programs that young people engage in willingly to acquire diverse skills. Professional youth workers often implement these practices within a volunteer setting (Kiely & Meade, 2018).

This study is based on the premise that youth workers play an important role in the context of the digital age in South Africa by imparting NEET youth with knowledge and skills that will help them to be economically active in the digital age. This shows how youth work practices is providing the NEET youth with the necessary skills needed in the digital age. A previous study in the South African context focused on the need for learning in the professional development of youth work. What makes this study unique is the fact that it focuses on NEET youth. Even though the youth work sector has a huge potential for promoting skills development among NEET youth, its actual contribution in South Africa remains unnoticed. This study thus tries to show how the youth work sector provide the NEET youth with the necessary skills needed in the digital age.

The world has moved toward an economic focus where all people are expected to acquire a new set of skills that will enable them to participate in the economy within the fourth industrial revolution (Bélanger, 2016). Many countries have prioritized lifelong learning for education and training to achieve economic growth within the digital age (Schwab, 2016). The outbreak of COVID-19 across the globe has accelerated the adoption of the fourth industrial revolution in the youth work sector (OECD, 2020). Even though lifelong learning does not always encompass the skills that people need to learn to do well in a specific job, it still enhances the individual's capabilities to participate in a democratic society (International Labour Organisation, 2021). Young people have been gaining the skills that enable them to participate in their communities.

According to the OECD (2020) half a million organizations that focus on the youth take advantage of the new technologies to provide services to young people that contribute to the development of the youth's digital skills. Young people's use of new technologies increased in the digital age (Declaration of the 2nd European Youth Work Convention, 2015). Therefore, the youth work sector must promote digital literacy as part of lifelong learning. This implies that the youth work sector moves to digital youth work to provide youth services. The study conducted by Chauke (2020) shows that the youth work sector was forced to move from traditional youth work to digital dexterity during COVID-19, in which youth services was rendered online through the use of new technologies. This helped the youth develop a new set of digital skills. According to the Council of the European Union (2017), the digital gap in the youth work sector needs to

be addressed to ensure that the youth are not left behind in the era of the digital age. The fast-changing society brought about by technological advancement requires competence in lifelong learning (Knapper, & Copley, 2000).

Learning outside formal education as one of the components of youth work practice plays a significant role in vulnerable groups such as the NEET youth by providing them with a route out of a poor labour market experience (Evans et al., 2013). Moreover, the NEET youths are known as a group of young people who are not in education, not in employment, and not in training (Sparreboom & Staneva, 2014). Youth work contributes to the well-being of young people through the sharing of information and provision of advice services (Sonneveld et al., 2020).

Emerging evidence suggests that youth work practice as part of non-formal education has the potential to develop young people's problem-solving skills (Westera, 2011). According to Murphy-Graham and Cohen (2022), youth work practice is important since it promotes lifelong learning by providing the youth with skills such as communication skills that are needed in the era of the digital age. Youth work practice is vital because it equips the youth with important skills that they need in the labour market (International Youth Foundation, 2013). Moreover, lifelong learning is suggested to be pivotal for young people's personal development in the digital age (Haydar & Kadir, 2012; Sekerbayeva et al. 2023). According to Boat et al. (2021), young people are able to gain work readiness skills in the youth work programmes since youth work practice focuses on social capital, unlike formal education which focuses on human capital. Young people require a complex skill that they need to execute a task in the digital age which places emphasis on lifelong learning (Edmonton & Saxberg, 2017; Hamakali & Josua, 2023).

Meier et al. (2012) argue that young people in youth work practices learn leadership skills such as being able to adapt to new environments and challenges. The NEET youth in the era of the fourth industrial revolution will need skills to adapt to a new way of doing things. Youth work practices provide self-directing learning opportunities for the youth whereby they start to be innovative and creative (Cook, 2011). Since the available literature does not provide evidence of studies that reported on skills youth learnt in youth work practice necessary in the context of the fourth industrial revolution or digital age, the present study sought to bridge the gap by shedding light on the contributions from the youth work practice from the perspective of the NEET youth as the beneficiaries of youth work service in a developing country.

THEORETICAL FRAMEWORK

This study adopted community youth development theory as the theoretical framework underpinning this research. Community youth development theory is a theoretical framework that emphasizes the significance of community engagement within the realm of youth work practice. Moreover, this theory advocates collaborative partnerships among the community, youth workers, and young people to enhance the empowerment of youth (Hastings, 2011). This theory was selected to explain the significance of youth work practice at the societal level in

empowering the youth to become active citizens in their communities and to participate in economic activities within the digital age. The community youth development theory attempts to improve communities to enable the youth to thrive in their communities. In mainstreaming positive youth development among the NEET youth, the researcher argue that youth workers should design a youth development intervention that will provide the NEET youth with the skills that they need in the digital age. Communities need to ensure that young people need become the community's number one priority (Krauss & Suandi, 2008). Thus, putting the needs of young people on the community agenda will enable NEET youth to get involved in community service. To promote positive youth development, youth workers should design programmes that will enable the NEET youth to attain the necessary skills in the digital age. Community youth development theory also emphasized the importance of making resources available for the youth in the community. If resources are made available in the community, the youth will become motivated to connect with their community and positively contribute to its development. The NEET youth should work with community members as partners; this will help them develop the skills needed to survive in the 21st century.

MATERIALS AND METHODS

As this study aims to explore the perspectives of NEET youth on the skills they had learnt in youth work practices that are necessary for the digital age, a qualitative approach was chosen using exploratory design for its capacity to elicit rich depth information and gain a better understanding of a social phenomenon based on the interpretation of the participants' lived experiences. An exploratory design in qualitative research is important due to its ability to explore a deeper meaning and understanding of complex issues from the participant's point of view (Marshall & Rossman, 2016). Followed by phenomenology, utilizing phenomenology allowed the researcher to delve into the essence of participants' experiences through interviews, shedding light on the intricacies of the subject matter under investigation. The researcher opted for the qualitative research approach because it is best suitable for capturing the participant's thoughts, feelings, beliefs, values, and assumptions during the interview process. This qualitative study employed an interpretivist paradigm to guide the exploration of the meaning of the phenomenon under investigation, drawing insights from the lived experiences of NEET (Not in Education, Employment, or Training) youth.

The target population in the study was NEET youth who participated in youth work practices (non-formal education activities). The youth work practice comprised a six-month skill development program initiated by a non-governmental organization dedicated to serving young people. The program focused on training youth in digital literacy, the other programme was four days business management intervention organized by South African agency responsible for youth development. The third program was community service. Purposive sampling as a type of non-probability sampling was used to sample 20 NEET youth aged 18-24 years old drawn from the Western Cape. Participants were purposively sampled because they could provide a

perspective on the skills that they have learnt in the youth work practice needed in the era digital age. The selection criteria for the study included the following: the participants must be between the ages of 18-24 years old from the Western Cape and that they must have a direct experience of participating in non-formal education activities (youth work practices). The demographic characteristics of the participants are presented in (Table 1) below.

Table 1.*Demographic characteristics*

Demographic	Characteristics	Frequency
Gender	Female	12
	Male	8
Age	18-20 Years	11
	20-24 Years	9
Language	IsiXhosa	20
Family characteristics	Nuclear family	5
	Single-parent family	9
	Grandparent family	2
	Extended family	4
Education	High School	16
	Matric	4
	Diploma	0
	Degree	0

Two focus group discussions (FGD) comprised of ten members each were conducted with the participants. Focus group discussions (FGD) were chosen because they gave the participants opportunities to speak openly about the skills, they had learned in youth work activities without being interrupted by the researcher assistant. To solicit information from the participants, the researcher appointed a researcher assistant from Cape Town, who work with the NEET youth to conduct a focus group discussion. Participants were provided with the opportunity to express their views in their own language. English and IsiXhosa were used during the focus group interviews. This method of inquiry is important because it enables the researcher's assistants to develop a good relationship with the participants and to explore their feelings. The focus group interviews ranged from 30 to 45 min. A reflective journal was used to document the participants' feelings during the focus group discussion. The participants were asked about the skills that they have learnt in youth work practices that are necessary in the digital age. The following questions were asked to collect information to achieve the objective of the study: What democratic values did you learn in youth work practices that are important in the digital age? How do youth work practices improve the skill set that is needed for the future of work?, In what way do youth work practices contribute to your emotional intelligence?, Tell me about ways that youth work practices enhance your creativity. What other important critical skills did you learn in youth work practices that are important in the digital age?

Data were analyzed using a thematic analysis that allows for richer and in-depth epistemological viewpoints. Thematic analyses distill insights from the coding process that classified the raw qualitative data. The following six steps of thematic analysis outlined by Braun & Clarke (2006) were applied in the present study: (1) The researcher familiarized himself with the data by reading through transcripts and notes that were taken during the interview and by taking note of the position's reflections; (2) generating initial codes to apply to the data; (3) consolidating all the codes into potential themes; (4) reviewing and checking the themes that were identified; (5) applying appropriate names and descriptions; and (6) drafting and refining the final report.

Ethical approval was obtained from the University of South Africa with reference number of Ref: 2022/09/07/90501543/22/AM. From the outset, it was important for the researcher to introduce the purpose of the study to the research assistant, who then introduced it to the participants. The research assistant ensured that informed consent was obtained to a considerable extent. The researcher assistant assured the participants that participation in the study was purely voluntary. This means that no person was forced to participate in the study. Participants could withdraw from the study at any given time. The researcher assistant assured the participants that their real names would not be shared with anyone. The privacy and confidentiality of the participants were considered in the present study. It is important that a researcher practice trustworthiness in a qualitative study. The following criteria guided by Maree (2013). were used to measure the study findings: credibility, transferability, dependability, and conformability. The credibility of the study was achieved by ensuring that participants had a chance to decide whether or not they want to voluntarily participate in the study without being forced to participate. To achieve transferability, the researcher ensured that the findings could be transferred to the wider population of the study, namely the young people who engage in youth work activities. Dependability was achieved by providing the data to other researchers to read and check the themes/sub-themes that stemmed from the study findings. The researcher had to ensure that the theme/subthemes represented in the study agreed with the participant's response and had to make sure that it aligns with the objective of the study. To enhance conformability, the researcher adopted a reflexive stance, which meant that the researcher had to ensure that his value did not influence the study findings. The researcher ensured that the study findings reflect the participant's responses verbatim.

FINDINGS

To conceal the identity of the participants, they were only identified by their age and gender. Youth work practices play an essential role in a NEET youth's life through the provision and enhancement of programs that offer an opportunity for the youth to participate in the labour market and society in general. This study aims to explore the perspectives of NEET youth on the skills they had learnt in youth work practices that are necessary for the digital age. The themes

and sub-themes that emerged from the data analysis are presented in Table 2. This is followed by a discussion of each theme and subtheme.

Table 2.

Themes and sub-themes

Theme	Sub-themes
Theme 1: Skills that NEET youth learn	Business acuity skills Digital skills
Theme 2: Democratic Values	Active citizen Teamwork skill

Skills That the NEET Youth Learnt

The NEET youth struggle to participate in the labor market due to a lack of skills required in the digital age. Various youth organizations in youth work sector have played a pivotal role in ensuring that the NEET youth receive the necessary skills that will enable them to participate in the labour market in the digital age. Participants confirmed that participating in youth work programs helped them acquire important skills needed in the digital age.

Business acuity skills

South Africa is currently battling with a higher rate of unemployment, particularly among the NEET youth. Unemployment poses a significant challenge for numerous NEET (Not in Education, Employment, or Training) youths in South Africa. A predominant issue is the lack of essential skills required to engage in the labor market, particularly in the digital age where proficiency in digital skills is increasingly imperative for most jobs. To address this socio-economic issue, participants during the interview stated that youth work practice plays an important role by ensuring that the NEET youth are taught how to start-up their own business as well as how to improve and grow their business. Furthermore, participants interviewed in the study indicated that their involvement in youth work practice helped them gain skills on how to start a business that will be able to make a profit in the digital age such as blogging. The following excerpts highlight how the participants viewed the skills that they have learnt in youth work practices that are needed in the digital age:

“I do not have formal education; therefore, finding decent employment has been a challenge for me in the past three years. Then, a lady advised me to join a youth development organization that offers free business management training to out of school youth. Since I joined the organization, I have learnt a lot about generating business ideas, what it’s like to be a successful businessman. I have learnt how to start a blogging business which I am thinking of starting in the next year” (20-year-old male).

“I have been involved in a youth led NPO for six months now. The CEO of the organization and his officials assist us in writing a business plan, and how to pitch a business idea while we

are looking for funding using Microsoft team and other social media platforms such as Zoom. Before I joined the organization, I didn't know what Microsoft team all is about but, now I know I am able to set up a meeting and pitch a business plan" (19-year-old male).

To run a successful business in the digital age, young people require financial management skills. One of the participants interviewed during the study had the following to say about financial management skills:

"I participated in the Business Management Intervention offered by the National Youth Development Agency. The program was not enough because it was only a one-week programme. However, this program helped me understand how to manage finance as a businesswoman through the understanding of financial modelling. The facilitator was excellent, I must say. I learned new skills regarding the management of my finances and how to better manage my business expenses" (24-year-old female).

The above extracts show that participants in youth work practices learned important skills needed to run a successful business in the digital age. These skills include financial modelling, whereby participants learn how to create a summary of a company's expenses and earnings in the form of a spread sheet. These skills are important for calculating the impact of a future event or decision.

Digital skills

Another skill that the NEET youth learnt from the youth work practice were that of digital skills. Regardless of their social or economic status, NEETs need digital skills in order to meet the global community needs as well as to participate in the labour market in the digital age. The participants in the study indicated that it was important for them to learn how to use a computer to write emails in order to apply for jobs. This is aptly illustrated by the responses below:

"Getting involved in an NPO that empowers young people helped me a lot because we were taught how to create our Gmail account and how to use it to apply for job opportunities and volunteer opportunities that could help us gain experience" (21-year-old male).

Another participant who shared the same sentiments had to say the following:

"I didn't have an email account before participating in the youth development program in my town. However, the organization taught me the importance of having an email account as well as how to use it to apply for a scholarship so I can further my studies. After creating an email account, I have applied for more than ten jobs. It is expensive since one needs to have money in order to buy data which I do not have but, it's better than printing more CVs" (24-year-old male).

The quotations above indicate that youth work practices played an important role in equipping the participants with digital skills such as learning how to set up an email account and learning how to apply for jobs using online platforms rather than using the traditional route which require printing more papers. In the digital age, it is important that the NEET youth learn how to use online platforms for their own benefits.

“The Youth organization in their youth development programme have helped us to develop a new set of skills on how do to things online” (19-year-old male).

Due to a lack of digital skills, NEET youth often struggle to use Google search engine to look for information online. The use of Google search engines is important in the digital age. During the interview, the participants indicated that they were taught how to use the Google search engine for their own benefit and growth in the era of the fourth industrial revolution. This is highlighted by the responses below:

“When I needed information about learning and job opportunities, I would go to Facebook but, after getting involved in the youth empowerment program I have learnt how to use Google search engine to search for information” (18-year-old female).

“At first, I didn’t know that there was a website called SA Youth. Mobi where we could look for education and job opportunities, but the youth development programme helped me to learn how to use Google to search for opportunities in SA Youth. Mobi. The website has many opportunities for the youth. I would advise other youth to check it out online”(20-year-old male).

The above-outlined quotations highlight that engaging in youth work practices has enabled participants to develop skills in utilizing Google search engines effectively for online information retrieval, thereby empowering them. Thus, in the digital age the NEET youth need to develop digital skills that will help them to effectively search online for information that can help them to further their education as well as to participate in the labour market.

Democratic value

It is important for the NEET youth to learn democratic values during the digital age since it develops a young person’s belief in making a society a better place to be and also to contribute to socio-economic development. The NEET youth who participated in the study learnt the following democratic values:

Active citizens

The youth of South Africa are confronted with a number of societal issues. To address some of these issues, the youth will need to take full responsibility with the help of the adults in their communities. As much as society expects the youth to be digital literate in the digital age it is equally important that the youth learn how to become active citizens. The participants in the study indicated that it was important for them to learn how to become active citizens in the digital age. This is evident from the following statements:

“Before I started participating in the youth empowerment program, I did not think of volunteering my service for free, but the programme taught me the importance of offering my service to the community without expecting anything in return” (21-year-old male).

“The organization that I am attached to is in partnership with the National Youth Development Agency. In 2020, we engaged in a Gender-Based Violence awareness campaign. We used to go to different townships such as Nyanga and Grossroad, teaching young men about

the importance of taking part in the fight against GBV. This initiative was good because many young men joined us in this programme” (23-year-old female).

“I volunteered in the National Youth Service Programme in 2021. Our task was to encourage more young people to register and vote in the 2021 Local Government Election. This program has taught me the importance of electoral democracy where I have decided to go and cast my vote for change in my ward” (21-year-old male).

Young people have to learn important skills that are essential in the digital age as part. Some of the participants indicated that they had decided to participate in the electoral process through voting as well as offering their service to their communities without expecting remuneration in return because in the youth work practice they were taught the significance of participating in the electoral democracy.

Teamwork skill

As a lifelong learner in the digital age, it is important for people to develop teamwork skills. The digital age requires people to learn how to work together to address societal issues and promote sustainable development goals. Therefore, youth workers in youth work practice that implements the youth empowerment programmes, need to make sure that the youth learn the importance of working with others to achieve common goals. The participants in the study highlighted that being involved in youth work practice under the supervision of adults helped them to learn how to work with other people. This is evident from the following:

“In a youth development program, I have learnt how to work with other people from different diversities. My area is mainly dominated by Africans. I never went to school nor worked with another race, but after being involved in the youth development programme the facilitator made sure to pair me with a coloured person when doing some activities. This helped me to learn other people’s culture and to work with them in a dignified manner” (18-year-old female).

“In the youth program I have gained the skills of working with other youth as well as adults and also learned how they handled everyday challenges and offered each other advice on how to overcome these challenges” (24-year-old male).

“Prior joining the youth development programme I was a short-tempered person, I always fought with my girlfriend. But this programme helped me to deal with my anger, learn how to work with other people and also learnt how to solve conflict in a dignify manner without causing a fight” (22-year-old male).

From these statements, the participants gained the important skill of working together with people from other backgrounds which is vital in promoting social cohesion in the digital age. In addition, it is important that people develop a conflict resolution skill. The participants in the study have gained the skill of solving a conflict without causing tension.

DISCUSSIONS

The NEET youth who participated in the present study provided valuable insights into the skills they had learnt in youth work practices that are necessary for the digital age. The study, while

small in scope, revealed that the NEET youth in youth work practices gained valuable skills for survival such as learning how to start a profitable blogging business that is of significance in the digital age. This finding agrees with the work of Chauke et al., (2021) that shows that the youth development initiatives empower the youth that are out of school to develop an entrepreneurial mind-set with the aim of starting their own businesses. Kluge et al., (2017) further argue that youth development programmes contribute to youth employability by training the youth on how to start their own businesses. After completing the programmes, the youth open their own businesses and often hire other youth. The NEET youth who took part in the study revealed that they learned important business skills necessary in the digital age such as how to manage their finances as well as creating a summary of a company's expenses using spread sheets on the computer. Another important skill that the NEET youth learnt in youth work practice outlined by most participants is digital skills. The mastering of digital skills amongst the youth in the digital age is perceived as essential in increasingly digitalising societies (Donoso, 2022; Helsper et al., 2021). The study revealed that since the NEET youth has been part of the youth work practice, they have learnt ways of operating a computer such as using computers to apply for job opportunities. Buccieri and Molleson (2015) indicate that youth outreach programmes play a vital role in training out of school youth/homeless youth to design and develop a mobile application for other homeless youth using computers. Youth work practices also taught the NEET youth how to make use of Google search engine to search for economic opportunities. The finding is consistent with Helsper and Smahel (2020) who argue that young people who participated in skills development programme are likely to gain a digital skill that will be immensely beneficial to them. As much as society in the digital age expects young people to develop digital skills that will enable them to make use of new technologies, the youth also need to be taught how to be active citizens (Moyo, 2020; Moyo et al., 2022). The results from the study also reflect how the NEET youth in youth work practice learnt about the importance of being active citizens. The study revealed that participating in youth work practice helped them to learn about the importance of volunteering their service for a good cause. These results concur with the work of Grant et al., (2021) that indicated that young people learn how to serve their communities in youth work activities. Evidence from the study indicated that by taking part in a voluntary programme taught young people an important trait which will enable them to design an effective programme to improve their communities without expecting anything in return (StreetGames, 2014). The youth work sector builds tangible skills and community connection among the youth which is essential in everyday life (Larson Nippolt et al., 2012). The participants of this study also revealed that they learnt how to work together with other people as part of a team in youth work practice. A youth development programme is a key for the socio-economic development of the youth in this age due to its ability in training the youth to collaborate with other people from different diversities (Chauke & Malatji, 2022). Ord et al., (2022) argues that young people are taught to be friendly toward other people. The findings of this study are supported by the community youth development theory. In the context

of this study, the community youth development theory emphasized that youth workers in the community setting in partnership with the NEET youth need to design effective programmes. These programmes will equip the NEET youth with the skills that they need in their own community. The results of this study have implications for both youth policy and youth work practice in developing countries such as South Africa. For instance, the results of the study should prompt youth policymakers to develop appropriate policies that will encourage NEET youth to participate in youth work practice as well as encouraging youth workers (professionals who work with young people in youth development intervention) in youth work practice to design and implement programmes that will provide the necessary skills to the youth in the digital age.

CONCLUSIONS AND RECOMMENDATIONS

It has become clear that the NEET youth developed a valuable skill in youth work practices that will help them to participate in socio-economic activities during the digital age. One of the lessons that the NEET youth learnt in youth work practice is digital skills which enabled them to use a computer. The NEET also learned how to set up their own businesses that would enable them to generate revenue in the digital age. The present study challenges the traditional stereotypes of 'the NEETs' as people who lack ambition. Their ambition showcases them as individuals who embrace lifelong learning in the context of digital age.

To ensure that the programmes implemented in youth work practices equip the NEET youth with the necessary skills in the digital age, the South African government should fast track the professionalization of youth work where qualified youth workers can offer the youth service in youth work practice. In order for youth work practices to have a valuable impact on the NEET youth in the digital age, youth workers need to be skilled with intensive knowledge so they can effectively implement youth work. There is a need for both a lifelong learning policy and legislative frameworks in South Africa that will improve the personal, cultural, social, and economic transformation of the youth not in employment, education, and not in training. The youth workers need to design an advanced cognitive, socio-emotional skills development programme in the digital age that will help the NEET youth to be critical thinkers and find solutions regarding issues that affecting humankind. This study recommends that further research studies should take place on evaluating the effectiveness of the youth development programme that is implemented by the government and that provide the NEET youth with the necessary skills needed in the era of the digital age in South Africa.

The study also had several limitations such as the purposively sampling of only a few participants while the participants were sampled in only one province and thus the findings of the current study cannot be generalised to the entire South African NEET youth population who participated in youth work practice in other provinces. Therefore, there is a need for a future study in the similar topic using quantitative research approach in order to sample large NEET youth population in South Africa.

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