



Youth arts and mental health: exploring connections in the Top End

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Participation in youth arts activities is generally considered 'good' for adolescents' social and emotional wellbeing. Yet much of the literature on this topic comes from a 'big-city' perspective that may not take into account the (at times conservative) social and cultural norms found in remote and rural locations. Corrugated Iron Youth Arts and The Research Centre for Health and Wellbeing at Charles Darwin University have been working together to understand if and how participating in youth arts is good for young people in and around the Darwin area in the Northern Territory.

The aim of this presentation is to share early results from a qualitative research project, about the mental health benefits of participation in youth arts in Darwin and, using existing literature, to place this research in a broader national and international context.

Firstly we overview national and international literature about the mental health impacts of participation in youth arts activities, with a focus on rural and remote locations. We then introduce Corrugated Iron Youth Arts, an organisation with 30 years' experience delivering community based youth arts activity in the Northern Territory. We provide early analysis of our own qualitative research exploring the health and wellbeing impacts of participation in youth arts upon 17 participants, focusing in specifically on mental health. Finally we compare and contrast the early results of our research with broader literature in order to understand similarities and differences between our Northern Australian and other contexts.

With the rapid rise of mental illness among adolescents in Australia, and in rural and remote contexts particularly, creative approaches to prevention are required. For many young people the social and cultural norms, and the particular types of masculinities and femininities often found in rural and remote locations can contribute to feelings of isolation and difference. Such young people appreciate and require safe outlets to explore who they are and what they can contribute. The research presented here provides qualitative evidence that participation in youth arts activities (particularly performance-based activity) can assist young people with self-confidence, a sense of 'creative' identity, and feelings of social connectedness and belonging. All of these things are important for good mental health.