

Social determinants of health: opportunities for youth through education and social support

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The Youth Opportunities to Education (Yo2Ed) program creates opportunities for youth who are disengaged from mainstream schooling, to participate in nationally accredited courses through TAFE New England Institute, Tamworth. The Yo2Ed program is based on a wrap-around service model to support the mental health, wellbeing and healthy lifestyle development of participants. Youth who experience social disadvantage are more likely to adopt harmful health habits, which if not addressed may lead to poor health outcomes in adulthood.

The Yo2Ed Project is a partnership brokered by Careers Network under the Links to Learning funding program. The Yo2Ed wrap-around services are developed in collaboration with Hunter New England Health Aboriginal Drug and Alcohol Team and Tamworth Aboriginal Medical Service. The program addresses social determinants of health such as education, social support networks and social exclusion. It achieves this by providing a safe and supportive environment for education and skills training, workshops from social support and health services, and opportunities for participants to give back to the community and in return receive recognition for their achievements.

It was identified that Yo2Ed participants had limited cooking skills and poor nutrition awareness. This led to a community nutrition project being developed in conjunction with students and staff from the University of Newcastle Department of Rural Health (UoNDRH) community engagement program and Yo2Ed Tamworth. Barriers to education included low literacy and numeracy, low self-esteem, varying ages and learning or mental health issues. It was identified that a tactile, participatory approach to education incorporating experiential learning would best engage youth in nutrition workshops. Existing nutrition resources and recipes were modified, and new resources and recipes developed in collaboration with Yo2Ed participants. Four workshops were conducted and an end-of-year presentation night offered an opportunity for participants to give back to the community and showcase skills and knowledge learnt by preparing food for family and community members.

A group process evaluation demonstrated a high level of satisfaction with meals, with students confident in their ability to replicate recipes at home. Due to their active involvement in the initial planning stages, students were motivated to complete the tasks and achieve agreed outcomes. This collaboration between the Yo2Ed program and UoNDRH has the potential to provide at risk youth with the skills and self-efficacy that will enable them to better manage the emotional and social pressures that lead to the adoption of detrimental nutrition-related health habits.