



Fast

FACTS

CANADIAN CENTRE FOR POLICY ALTERNATIVES – MANITOBA

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Fresh Food Fuels Change

An innovative pilot evaluation

People are food insecure when they do not have access to, or enough money to buy safe and nutritious food, preventing them from enjoying a healthy diet. Food insecurity is major concern for many low-income Winnipeg families. Aboriginal and Newcomer refugee families are among the poorest in Winnipeg, and have very high rates of food insecurity, which is closely related to poor nutritional health. Too many children have diets that are too high in sugar, fat and salt from eating an abundance of highly processed and fast foods, which can be less expensive than healthier alternatives. This contributes to one third of Manitoba children being overweight or obese.

While having adequate income is the best solution to food insecurity, community-based educational programs that increase life skills, including food skills, can be part of an overall solution. Such programs must be planned and evaluated in partnership with communities to ensure maximum benefit. Fresh Fuel: The CanU Food Club is one such example. It provides hands-on food skills education and a healthy meal. Taught by Human Nutritional Sciences students at the University of Manitoba, Fresh Fuel is an amazing opportunity for kids to “get their hands dirty” in the kitchen.

Fresh Fuel is part of CanU (Canucanada.org), a growing afterschool enrichment program in Winnipeg that provides positive sport and educational experiences to vulnerable Winnipeg children, in particular Newcomer and Aboriginal children. In

partnership with the University of Manitoba, CanU aims to build potential in these children to achieve long term academic and health goals, through imparting short-term positive outcomes such as improved self-esteem. CanU also provides enriching experiences for university students who act as teachers and mentors for the children.

Changing children’s dietary patterns is a difficult venture due to external factors including a calorie-dense food environment and food insecurity, as well as limited program duration. Furthermore, many programs have not been adequately evaluated or have had “top down” evaluation strategies implemented, despite the fact that the conclusions drawn from these sorts of evaluations are not meaningful. Clearly, more investigation needs to be done to understand a) how to improve these programs through participatory evaluations, and b) how they play a role in improving food and nutritional outcomes. Effective, relevant evaluations are key to understanding and improving community-based food and nutrition programs.

In 2013 CanU approached the University of Manitoba to assist with conducting an evaluation of Fresh Fuel. CanU and Dr. Joyce Slater from the Department of Human Nutritional Sciences agreed to undertake a participatory evaluation process. Mihiri Witharana, a Master’s student, developed, implemented and analyzed the evaluation and the project was financed through the Manitoba Research Alliance’s SSHRC funded grant: *Partnering for Change: community based solutions*

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for *Aboriginal and Inner-city poverty*. This “Utilization-Focused Evaluation” approach involved CanU staff and Board members from the very beginning, making the evaluation more successful than if just led by academics. This experience allowed us to build rapport and work together as a team, an essential skill that we needed throughout the evaluation process. It also ensured that the right evaluation questions were asked, appropriate data collection measures were used, and meaningful results were produced for CanU.

Evaluation results found that the food skills education component of Fresh Fuel was successful in engaging children in teamwork, bonding and developing relationships. They also had a lot of fun, and improved their basic food and cooking skills. Outcomes related to improved nutrition knowledge and food safety were more modest. Most children tried new foods, and about one third stated they made small changes at home.

University students received many benefits, primarily around skill development and career development (teaching/working with children; some students decided to pursue a career working with children).

Evaluation results were disseminated throughout the project, and a final report was produced in conjunction with the ad-hoc evaluation committee.

The evaluation produced a series of recommendations around program organization and implementation, which CanU will use to improve program delivery in the future. CanU has been growing bigger each year, and it is anticipated that more than 200 children will be attending next year. The evidence-based approach to the evaluation of Fresh Fuel will have a positive impact on this large cohort, and increase the likelihood of achieving CanU’s overall goals.

The participatory, Utilization-Focused Evaluation approach led to a more meaningful and relevant evaluation in

addition to other benefits. This approach was viewed as very beneficial by the CanU Board of Directors, and will be considered for future CanU program evaluations. The evaluation also developed and pilot tested novel data collection methods including interactive, hands-on food and nutrition “stations” where children could be observed, and “personal narratives” from university students. These methods could be used in future community-based evaluation studies.

Collaboration between academics and the community through Utilization-Focused Evaluation approaches can lead to richer experiences for both, and increase the likelihood of positive outcomes for program participants. By extension other community-based initiatives in Winnipeg can benefit by partnering and collaborating with institutions like the University of Manitoba through other participatory research projects.

Policy Implications: Despite the benefits realized through Fresh Fuel, the impact on children’s dietary behaviour was modest. This is not surprising due to the socio-economic environments which vulnerable children inhabit. Poverty and food insecurity are pervasive realities for low-income families which cannot be ameliorated through community-based programs alone, however excellent. Real living incomes must be the platform upon which food skills programming can impact long-term dietary behaviour changes.

Additionally, children’s food environments, such as schools, daycares and community centres, should be supported to provide nutritious, affordable foods and food skills education that is culturally-relevant for Aboriginal and Newcomer children and their families.

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