

YES (YOUTH EMPOWERMENT STRATEGY) PASIFIKA: THE FORMATION OF A MODEL FOR PASIFIKA YOUTH DEVELOPMENT

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Introduction

This paper outlines the approach of Ola Fou Pasifika Youth Development which seeks to improve the institutional capacity and recognition of those working with youth in the Pacific region, and to encourage young people to identify and create solutions to problems they may experience in their own communities. This paper will, specifically, cover how the Ola Fou approach plays out in practice by detailing the six principles of Ola Fou's Youth Empowerment Strategy (YES) Pasifika. YES Pasifika can be seen as a model which can effectively guide a transformative, evidence based practice of indigenous youth development in the Pacific.

A background to youth development in the Pacific

The Pacific region is going through some significant changes that need to be realised and attended to should we desire to positively contribute to its evolving culture. As much as we see the impact of these changes across the board, young people can be identified as those most affected. A number of regional publications have identified young people as both a rapidly growing sector of Pacific society and as a source of instability in the regions if basic needs around education, employment and community integration are not addressed (Curtain & Vakaoti, 2011; Woo & Corea, 2009). The poor opportunities facing youth in Pacific Island countries (PICs) are widely acknowledged and are held to be due to: difficulties in accessing appropriate education and employment, marginalisation and lack of participation, and rapid

social change (McMurray, 2005). These challenges are held to be symptomatic of wider socio-economic issues, including poor economic prospects, difficulties around being a small island state, climate change and disasters, socio-cultural transitions, involving rapid urbanisation and gender inequality. While there is agreement that the situation for youth needs specific and urgent attention, concerns remain over the cultural appropriateness of interventions, lack of focus on the agency of young people, and the general lack of progress made for Pacific youth to date. Many attempts to address issues for young people in the region are critiqued as being top-level policy frameworks that have little impact at a grass-roots level, or as being one-off, haphazard interventions which are not evidence based or integrated into country systems.

Ola Fou Pasifika Youth Development

Ola Fou Pasifika Youth Development offers training and support for youth and community workers within the Pacific, and works to empower young people within the region to identify needs in their own communities and become active in responding to these (Praxis Pacific, 2012b). Ola Fou, which means 'new life' in Samoan, is funded by the New Zealand Aid Programme and officially began in 2006. The organisation offers an 18 month Certificate in Pasifika Youth Development and an 18 month Diploma in Youth and Community Work (Curtain & Vakaoti, 2011). Both qualifications are recognised by the New Zealand Qualifications Authority and are offered over a series of block courses to practitioners from the Solomon Islands, Vanuatu, PNG, Fiji, Tonga, and Samoa (Curtain & Vakaoti, 2011; Elliot, 2008).

The dream of Ola Fou is to develop models of practical, positive youth development in communities across the Pacific, with the aim of improving the well-being of Pacific youth and strengthening Pacific communities (Praxis Pacific, 2012a). Ola Fou works to create an environment where youth workers are empowered to work alongside youth and encourage them to become agents of change in their communities. This is achieved through promoting participatory, developmental and indigenous approaches to working with youth, raising the credibility and worth of youth work, and engaging young people as agents of positive change (Elliot, 2008; Praxis Pacific, 2012a). As part of the Ola Fou course, students, together with young people in their communities, conduct research around challenges in their community and then develop practical responses to these needs (Curtain & Vakaoti, 2011; Praxis Pacific, 2011). In this way, the Ola Fou approach is to involve young people in responding to

needs in their own communities through projects that are grass-root, small scale and low cost. This model encourages students and communities to look for solutions *within* their communities, not from the outside and work from the grassroots up. To date, over 60 community projects have been undertaken in various Pacific communities by Ola Fou's past and present students (Praxis Pacific, 2012a). Ola Fou was recognised in the 2011 State of Pacific Youth Report to be a creative model for working with youth and supporting young people to contribute to their own and their communities' development (Curtain & Vakaoti, 2011; Praxis Pacific, 2012a).

Citizenship and leadership are also central concepts to the Ola Fou programme. There are three pathways for the development of leadership in the Pacific. The first is through traditional structures such as the *matai* system in Samoa. In many of the Pacific cultures these pathways are hereditary. The second are the forms of leadership created by western structures such as government jobs (politicians, administrators, teachers) and leadership in the church. These pathways are often based on access to tertiary education. Although Ola Fou is primarily an educational project, it is focused on developing a third type of leader. There are people who develop into a leadership role within their communities because they actually do something practical and of value to the local people. It is this third pathway to leadership that Ola Fou is seeking to initiate young adults into.

Through engaging young people in identifying and responding to needs within their own communities Ola Fou contributes to two essential outcomes. Firstly, in the process of creating practical responses (boat building, building a bus stop, a market or a wharf, or running a canteen at a community centre) many young people are learning practical skills that make them more employable. Secondly, they are being integrated into their community as citizens; a person who takes responsibility for the wider good of their family, community or nation. When young people are excluded from citizenship they are more likely to be involved in negative outcomes such as unemployment, substance abuse and crime, as a result our communities are less safe and our society less stable (Woo & Corea, 2009). Those who contribute to their communities become more closely connected to them. In the longer term, as Ola Fou graduates develop into this third pathway of leadership, the aim is that this will result in many moving into senior leadership roles within NGOs, churches and government agencies – based not just on their qualifications or status, but on what they are actually achieving on the ground.

Youth Empowerment Strategy (YES) Pasifika

Over the last couple of years Ola Fou has been developing a model of practice to guide a Pasifika approach to Youth Development within the region. The outcome of this has been the formation of the Youth Empowerment Strategy (YES) Pasifika. The goal behind developing the YES Pasifika principles is that these will increasingly come to guide work and policy implementation with regard to young Pacific Islanders. YES draws on: observations from practice, indigenous models and knowledge, the Youth Development Strategy Aotearoa, and wider youth development research and theory. Ola Fou is a journey of learning and embraces a reflective practice which involves adapting the programme to lessons learnt along the way. Over the past six years Ola Fou has learnt from the young people they work with by observing how youth workers and youth themselves can contribute positively in their communities, and what contributes to their ability to do so and to their own healthy development. Additionally, many practitioners involved in the Ola Fou network incorporate their own experiences and knowledge resulting from working with youth in their communities. This knowledge, observations and experience in practice all fed into the formulation of principles to guide work with young people in the region.

In addition to observations in practice, indigenous models and knowledge were also drawn upon. For example, the Circle of Courage, Na Bure and Fale Tapa Lima. The Circle of Courage is a model portraying four needs young people are required to meet in order to foster healthy development, these include: belonging, mastery, independence, and generosity. The Circle of Courage was developed as a result of studies around how traditional indigenous cultures raise healthy young people. The four needs identified by the Circle of Courage have been used and adapted within Ola Fou. Na Bure is a Fijian approach to development which involves taking into account family, mental, physical and traditional well-being. In addition to these indigenous models the Youth Development Strategy of Aotearoa (YDSA) help shape the development of YES Pasifika. As there is not currently one comprehensive set of *principles* guiding youth development in the Pacific, the YDSA was studied as an example of principles guiding youth development. In addition to the YDSA and indigenous models, wider youth development research and theory informed the YES Pasifika. There is a wealth of research and theoretical frameworks around youth development globally, some of which, for example Bronfenbrenner's ecological model and Hart's ladder of participation, have been used and adapted to guide Pacific youth work.

Drawing on the four foundations above, the YES Pasifika encompasses six main principles held to be important in guiding work with young people in the Pacific region. These are discussed in more depth below and include: having a youth development focus, being strength based, promoting participation, seeing the whole (holistic) picture of well-being, fostering quality relationships, and building positive connections. The first of these is having a youth development focus. Work with young people needs to be based on understandings of their developmental age and needs. In the Pacific context this could specifically be taken to mean that every young person needs a 'village'; a socially supportive context in which they have people who believe in them and who assist them to develop as healthy young people. This is particularly important as internal mobility within PICs is increasing and resulting in the dislocation of many youth from their communities. Additionally many traditional sources of support, such as elders and extended family, are struggling to maintain relevance in light of the numerous new influences confronting young people (Woo & Corea, 2009). A healthy village meets the four essential needs identified in the Circle of Courage; opportunity for belonging, mastery, independence and generosity. In this way any intervention for young people within the Pacific should both promote healthy villages and act to meet the four essential needs of young people.

The second principle guiding work with young people is taking a strengths-based approach. This is particularly important in light of the negative conceptualisations that tend to be present around young Pacific Islanders, for example that they are troublemakers, a time bomb and a wasted generation. Viewing young people as such risks resulting in those most in need continuing to be marginalised and being seen as unworthy of intervention. Changing the language about young people may be the first step toward changing the situation for them. Thus, looking past problems to understand the needs, and seeing the potential in every young person should be central principles guiding work with youth in the region. The third principle is around participation, particularly focused on young people being an integral part of the 'solution'. This is important within the Pacific where some reports state that there is a culture of silence around young people who are often excluded from decision making within their communities (Jayaweera & Morioka, 2008). More specifically, young people should not just have a say but should be integrally involved in leading positive change within their communities. When young people contribute to their communities they are developing responsibility and generosity, youth also learn most through doing, which can also build their confidence (MYA, 2002). Allowing meaningful participation should be taken into consideration at all stages of work with young people in the region.

A further principle guiding work with young people in the Pacific should be around seeing the whole picture of well-being and embracing holistic models for intervention, such as *fale tapa lima*, which take physical, social, mental, spiritual, and environmental considerations into account. This principle acknowledges that wider social and environmental contexts set the big picture within which young people grow up. It also acknowledges that focusing only on one area of youth development is not sufficient if other areas are ignored. Interventions for youth must, consequently, take into account the holistic needs of a young person.

The fifth principle for working with young Pacific Islanders is around quality relationships between the people working with youth and the youth themselves. Quality relationships involve those that show care and give time to young people. Central to this is the need for consistent, ongoing relationships, as opposed to one-off interventions. These long-term relationships could involve the presence of a champion for young people in their communities who maintain contact with them and build belonging within the community. The last principle is linked to this and involves building connections. While youth workers should build quality relationships with youth they work with, they should also be working toward building and strengthening positive connections between young people and their communities and families, as well as to education, church, sports and employment opportunities. This links back to the first principle of creating healthy 'villages' around youth, and highlights the need for interventions to intentionally work to bridge and strengthen the connections young people have to their social environment.

In conclusion, embracing and implementing work with young people around these principles is of central importance to improving the situation for young people within their communities and within the Pacific region as a whole. Work with young people in the region should be explained by and linked back to these principles.

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