

The University of the South Pacific

From the Selected Works of Cresantia Frances Koya Vaka'uta

2009

How do we teach sexual health in the Pacific classroom?

Cresantia Frances Koya Vaka'uta



Available at: https://works.bepress.com/cf_koyavakauta/15/

HOW DO WE TEACH SEXUAL HEALTH IN THE PACIFIC?

Advocating Culture and Faith-based Approaches to SRH in the Pacific Classroom.

Cresantia Frances Koya, School of Education USP.



Paper developed for Teachers' Curriculum Skills Workshop on SRHE in Fiji and Tonga 2009 – 2010 "Sensitizing teachers to the teaching of Sexual and Reproductive Health in the Pacific". This curriculum development workshop aimed at changing mindsets and providing some basic skills in developing cultural appropriate and faith-based activities using (a) Integrated Across-the-curriculum approach; and (b) Expressive Arts.

*"To effectively combat the spread of HIV/AIDS requires the development of approaches that allow our young to be involved. **Simply conveying negative messages and the need for abstinence is both unhelpful and unrealistic.** Our Youth have to be given some responsibility – and must be trusted – in order to build confidence, both in themselves and in the preventative strategies in which their participation is sought" Madaiwiwi (Cited in Tubman, 2008, p248).*

HIV, Silence and the Pacific Youth Festival 2009

The stage production "A Love for Life: Silence and HIV" draws together the five themes of the Pacific Youth Festival 2009 – Climate Change, Pacific Identities, Governance, Peace and Security, Healthy Living and Skills for Life.

INTRODUCTION

The crisis of climate change in the Pacific extends far beyond impending ecological and physical environmental implications. The sociological climate is also at risk. Signs indicate a loss of values, culture and spiritual disconnectedness. This is the changing climate of the Pacific.

Education has a role to play in ensuring that we sustain wholesome societies that maintain the wisdom and knowledge of our ancestors, combined with new technologies. "A Love for Life: Silence and HIV" challenges leaders at the regional, national and community level to consider the need for an informed youth population. While the performance has obvious implications for healthy living, Mere's story reminds us that all five themes are intricately connected. It reiterates the need for awareness, and skills in coping with the issue of HIV

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and AIDS reminding us that finding answers to our problems requires deep reflection and a reaffirmation of what it means to be *who we are, where we are*. This, alone, will determine *where we are going* and the extent of Climate Change in our *vast ocean of islands* (Hau'ofa, 1993).

THE NEED FOR SEX EDUCATION IN THE PACIFIC

To teach or not to teach Sex Education is a debate that has been ongoing for some years now. A notable increase in youth populations in the region and subsequent increases in rates of teenage pregnancies, STI's and a general lack of awareness about Reproductive Health and sexuality has not deterred critics. As a result, the silence surrounding Sexual Health and HIV/AIDS is deafening. In doing so, we continue to put our youth at risk. This is both irresponsible and unsustainable practice.

This production and educational resource is developed as an educational tool that can be used at the upper primary, secondary and tertiary level. Alternatively, it could also be used in training and sensitizing peer groups and communities.

It is suggested that an integrated approach to the teaching of HIV & AIDS in the context of Sexuality, Sexual Health, and Reproductive Health be taken across a variety of subject areas including but not exclusive to English, Health Science, Basic Science, Religion, Moral Instruction/Values Education or the Virtues Project, Biology, Social Science, Economics, History, and even Mathematics.

An abridged toolkit, these tips addresses ways by which SRHE may be delivered sensitive to culture and religion. Its purpose is not to overload our youth with information but rather to engage them in active learning that provokes critical thinking, attitude change, reinforcement of values and respect for themselves and others. The intended learning outcome of this strategy is to ensure that knowledge and skill materialise into noticeable behavioural change.

The approach advocated is premised on the very foundation of *human dignity and relationships* which are core to all Pacific communities.

CAN WE PROMOTE A CULTURALLY SENSITIVE AND RELEVANT APPROACH TO EDUCATION FOR SEXUAL HEALTH?

The question of silence and sexuality is usually qualified with an argument for cultural appropriateness. Sex is just not talked about with young people. As educators, it is a civic responsibility to provide learning experience (knowledge, and skills) that enable our young to live long and healthy, productive lives.

Sex Education is culturally relevant. While the word sex may never have been raised, Sex Education actually begins from the first point of cultural socialisation in all Pacific cultures. This can be seen in the first recognition that a girl's relationship with her mother and sisters is markedly different to that with her brothers and father; to the placement of sleeping quarters within the communal living space, to appropriate behaviour, dress and language.

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The challenge for educators is to review the potential for cultural approaches to the teaching and learning of Sexual Health and Behaviour.

Cultures are dynamic, evolving over time, absorbing new values, beliefs and practices.

Regardless of whether cultural change is good or bad, teachers and trainers must not be made to feel that they are wrong to talk about such issues in the classroom. Nor should they be blamed for the loss of cultural values, beliefs or lifestyles, we have the mainstream media and modernisation to thank for that. There are many ways by which these sensitive topics may be addressed in the classroom. Teachers, particularly of younger children must be mindful of the fact that you don't need to talk about sexual intercourse to teach responsible sexual behaviour, personal human dignity and a sense of self-respect.

Suggested Activities for the Culturally Sensitive Sex Education Classroom:

1. Think Big, Start Small.
2. Consider ways by which the media uses sex to sell products. Students research, observe and debate their views on the objectification of women in the sale of perfumes, jewellery or cars for example. These may be contrasted with the cultural concept of a woman of beauty/ self respect.
3. Students may reflect on the opportunity and social costs of changes in moral code, and what is considered acceptable or unacceptable in society.
4. Constructing a cultural timeline mapping changes in fashion, music, dance and so forth could be an activity for younger students.
5. Using relationships as the core foundation of Pacific societies as a theme. Issues such as Va, Wah -as the sacred thread that connects people in community, and how HIV/AIDS can be a divisive or uniting force.
6. Utilize the potential of the arts, poetry, painting, dance, role-plays, oratory and film are just a few of the examples of the kinds of activities that appeal to youth. The key is building on interest and providing a theme.
7. Community service – this is a wonderful opportunity to engage our youth who are growing up in an increasingly selfish age where the 'i' takes precedence over the 'we'. Fundraising drives for the disadvantaged may be extended to include reading visits to local orphanages and children's hospitals. Higher levels may consider ways that they might contribute to the +ve community in their locality.
8. Media Sensitivity and Human dignity – students can collect and debate media sensitization to +ve persons and communities examining coverage and language used human rights issues, discrimination and stereotypic attitudes.

WHAT ABOUT RELIGION?

No religion preaches violence or discrimination. All religions have the same fundamental rule of doing to others what you would have them do to you. This is the thread that connects Pacific culture with Religion. Education can reinforce the spirituality of both culture and religion through effective, thought provoking activities.

Faith, hope, compassion and love are core values emphasized in religious education; these extend into respect, tolerance, understanding, connectedness and acceptance.

Suggestions for a Spiritual Approach to Sex Education:

1. Students examine respective religious doctrines and teachings about self-respect and respect for others, focusing on action based approaches to demonstrating this respect and compassion in their daily lives.
2. Utilize media stories with religious stories of discrimination and contextualise into the religious practice and beliefs of the local community.
3. Debate the potential decline in morality as a result of sexually implicit films, song lyrics and popular song clips (images, action, clothing). Get students to reflect on the significance of the words of the most recent top hit song.
4. Use values as a basis for students to reflect on the silence surrounding HIV/AIDS and the hidden cost of this silence. Consider the values of compassion, human dignity and acceptance.
5. Provide opportunity for students to research on generically acceptable practices which undermine the values of love and respect in our treatment of sexual minorities, sex workers and HIV/AIDS infected persons.
6. Review the concept of peace and unity in terms of social disconnectedness overt and hidden. How do we treat people who are different, and why?
7. Community service may be used similarly as in the Cultural approach.
8. Sexual relations as a spiritual experience may be discussed with higher levels and students should be encouraged to see abstinence not as missing out, but rather ensuring that the sexual experience is a meaningful and spiritual one.
9. Respect and Love as an extension of the spiritual should be emphasized in debates about the value of monogamous relationships as opposed to multiple sexual partners
10. Consider the various ways by which persons may contract HIV/AIDS using a case-study approach.
11. Human interest stories provide the opportunity to view the infected as spiritually connected persons with similar interests, dreams and aspirations.

“A Love for Life” – USING THE PRODUCTION AS A STARTING POINT¹

The performance ‘*HIV and Silence- A love for Life*’, was carefully put together ensuring that cultural, religious, social and economic realities in the region were generically depicted. This production may be used as a literature rich text allowing students the opportunity to use film genre as a means by which to engage in social learning.

Suggested Activities:

Using the integrated approach, the DVD may be used as a teaching tool across a variety of subject areas. Some examples include:

1. Research and analyze Pacific statistics in Mathematics.
2. Examine trends in Economics and the potential economic cost of increased infection to a family and to a nation.
3. Reflect on themes in English class, violence, relationships familial, cultural and cross-cultural, spirituality both cultural and religious, education and awareness, socio-economic reality of infected persons, and discrimination.
4. Consider communities at risk/ vulnerable communities in Social Studies, such as economic hardship, multiple sexual partners, sexual minorities, sex workers and women and children.
5. Dialogue on the link between ignorance and discrimination/stereotypic behaviour in Social Studies and Religion
6. Reflect on the poetry and lyrics of the production as an extension of poetry class using literary devices to examine themes, styles and rhythm.
7. Debate on the unifying and divisive nature of Religion in various contexts.
8. Using respect for self and family as a means by which to review suicide in Religion and Social Studies classroom.
9. Debate the need for community awareness and the right to privacy for those infected in Religion and Social Studies.
10. Extend the role play as part of students’ analysis to consider possible outcomes to continue the story five years into the future. What is the setting? What is the context? How has the situation changed or stayed the same?
11. Consider Jone as a character study. What kind of a person is he? What is the context or back story to his behaviour and lack of respect for Mere? What do students already know about the psychology of human behaviour and violence that can be drawn on here?
12. Consider Bubu (Grandmother) as a character study. What must she be going through as a mother watching her daughter go through such a traumatic experience? How does she balance the cultural/religious with her own feelings of anger and fear?
13. Research into personal experiences of infected persons who have spoken to the media and use these as inspirational stories. These may be used to reinforce values education.

¹ See Annex 1 for Production Details



[Fiji, 2009]

CHALLENGES AND POSSIBILITIES - THE END IS ALWAYS THE BEGINNING

Culture and Religion have been used as excuses for inaction in the area of SRHE for too long. If political will is gauged by commitment to regional policy and strategy developments through the Pacific Islands Forum Education Ministers' Meeting (FEDMM), the endorsement for SRHE and education for HIV, AIDS is clearly indicated at the regional level. Examples of this include the Pacific Regional Strategy on HIV and AIDS (2005), and more recently the Action Plan for the Implementation of Education for Sustainable Development in the Pacific 2008 – 2014 and the Pacific Education and Development Framework 2009 – 2015.

What is needed at the National level is the **implementation** of this commitment through meaningful translation into concrete curriculum development and change at the National level.

Engagement with relevant stakeholders at the Governmental Ministry level, Civil Society Organisations and Non-Governmental Organisations, Church and cultural leaders, women's groups, sexual minority groups, youth groups, parents, teachers, students and partner agencies is essential.

It may be timely to consider what aspects of SRHE are working - where are the gaps and how do we address these. Just as important as stories of best practice, is the sharing of failed projects and approaches as we may be able to compile a list of 'lessons learnt' in order to develop an SRHE that addresses the 3 Rs – relevance, readiness and resources. A scoping exercise may prove useful in this regard.

Curriculum Gaps must be identified and an action-plan developed at the Ministry level as well as at the School level. And schools must consider the usefulness of School based curriculum development and Class based curriculum development thereby empowering teachers to incorporate necessary information based on school/class needs.

Curriculum research is also a critically weak area of curriculum work which needs to be maximised as a needs-based approach to curriculum reform.

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Some areas for consideration include syllabus inclusion (content), resources, teacher training and skills (Professional Development), assessment and evaluation of (a) content coverage; (b) teachers' attitudes to the curriculum; (c) students learning and, the monitoring of implementation.

Particularly necessary is a consideration of use of a culture and faith-based model to complement SRHE approaches at the National level. A critical question to consider is "how can cultural and religious communities engage in curriculum development?"



[Tonga, 2010]

About the toolkit:

The suggested activities outlined in this paper are by no means an exhaustive list. The potential to develop meaningful learning experiences is limitless. Activities that engage young Pacific islanders in critical thinking based on deep self-reflection provides a platform from which conscientization may emerge. Such soul searching and nurturing is needed for the development of sustainable futures that strengthen Pacific identities giving the Pacific future hope that all is not lost and that people still matter.

"The violence in our world, both to people and to the environment, causing climate change, calls urgently for a prophetic pathway out of the doom of our own creation. We live in a world of many peoples and many challenges and opportunities. Globalisation and technology may be promoting some forms of communication, but ease of communication does not necessarily lead to good and creative relationships. Groaning and glaring poverty is not so much the result of lack of resources as our isolation from one another – our failure to realise the depth of our connection" (Halapua, 2008, p8).

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ANNEX 1

Part A. Storyline & Background to the Production

Storyline

The Story is about a woman who is separated from her first husband and is now living with her new partner, her mother and her two daughters from her first marriage. The storyline begins when she finds out that she is pregnant and is also diagnosed with HIV. The production follows the conflict, stigma and discrimination that she and her two daughters face because of her status. The thematic highlight of the production is to demonstrate how important the family unit is to well-being and the role that culture and religion can and should play in supporting those infected and affected by HIV and AIDS. The climax of the story is at the birth of a baby boy who is HIV negative.

Background

The performance *HIV and Silence* was first commissioned by the UNAIDs in Suva for the purpose of creating awareness in Pacific communities. The Oceania Dance Theatre (ODT) performance was first shown in Fiji and Samoa in 2007, with a follow up performance and awareness campaign shown during the 10th Pacific Arts Festival in Pagopago, Amerika Samoa 2008.

With a shared interest in Pacific Arts, we were determined to tell a story that would make meaning of a social concern that affects thousands of Pacific islanders. As script writers, we began by asking ourselves questions such as: *Where should our story take place? Who are the main players? What is the HIV experience in the family unit and in the social context? And more importantly: What is the Pacific experience of HIV in terms of social stigma and coping with the stress and trauma of first discovery?* With a draft script in hand, and a selection of poetry and songs, input was sought from PIAF founder Maire Bopp Du Pont. Her initial suggestions and comments contributed a sense of honesty that brought the HIV Pacific experience to life.

Some of the issues core to the development of the production included the need for a Pacific story that was easy to identify with. We wanted the story to focus primarily on people and their relationships, highlighting the potential for conflict as well as empowerment and support systems that exist in our homes and wider communities. We also deliberately considered the spiritual aspect of Pacific life which meant that we needed to think about both cultural conceptions of spirituality as well as Christianity in the script.

Another aspect deliberately included were the opposing tensions of acceptance and love, versus rejection and blame. Additional issues that were considered as indicators of risk behavior included drug and alcohol abuse, multiple sexual partners and prostitution. On support systems, we considered the use of friendly health services and family and friends as support groups providing a sense of security and dignity to the experience.

Central to the discussion was the need for a demystification of sex - to talk about sex in the Pacific to combat silence which breeds ignorance. Also key to the concept of silence was the notion of the

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coconut wireless and how ignorance leads to false information, gossip and an unhealthy fear and shame towards those infected and their families.

We wanted to highlight the role young people play as Peer Educators and how they can choose to make a positive change or to be part of the discrimination that is perpetrated by social stereotyping and the stigma that is part and parcel of the HIV experience.

The performance targets at prevention, protection, treatment, policy making and most significantly empowerment of the most vulnerable. Its production offers silence as a metaphor to highlight the need for more dialogue and discussion about sexuality, sexual behavior and the HIV/ AIDs reality in the Pacific today.

The Story

A Love for Life is a story of love and crisis faced by Mere a young Fijian woman (Mele, Tonga) in her late thirties. Her story unfolds through her own experiences as well as those of her two teenage daughters, Moana (Ocean) and Loloma (Fiji and Ofa Tonga – Love). The production draws out the domestic violence of her first marriage and the self-loathing that she faced during those troubled times.

The story begins in a squatter settlement where Mere now lives with her mother, her partner Rajesh (Fiji and Maika, Tonga) and her daughters from her previous marriage. When she discovers that she is pregnant and has contracted HIV, it is these familial relationships that threaten to break her. It is only through their support and encouragement that she is able to realize that all is not lost and they in turn come to realize that the illness has not changed the person that she always was.

The two daughters, provide an insight into the kinds of support that youth are capable of not only to each other but also to their families in times of crisis and how young people sometimes need to look outside of themselves in order to realize the strength of their own abilities.

Interwoven into the storyline, are the elements of religion, social stigma and the support of a loving family. The story ends with the birth of a male child and the promise that everything will be alright.

Production Administration:

The University of the South Pacific (USP), French Embassy de Suva, UNAIDS, Oceania Centre for Arts, Culture and Pacific Studies, (USP), Pacific Youth Festival National Organizing Committee (PYF), Ministry of Youth and Sports – Fiji, Ministry of Health – Fiji, Pacific Islands Aids Foundation (Piaf), Fiji Network of people living with HIV/AIDS (FJN+), Secretariat of Pacific Communities (SPC), and the School of Journalism – USP.

Part B. Themes/Issues/Outcomes to be included/achieved in the production:

(A) Pre Production outcomes:

1. Easily identifiable Pacific story with the main focus centered on people and their relationships which gives birth to hope, empowerment and inspiration
2. A gifted young girl who travels through time and is visited by the spirits
3. Acceptance and love as opposed to feelings of rejection and blame of children as a result of parental divorce, familial vicissitude and social conflicts
4. Alternatives to risk behaviors such as 1. Drug and alcohol abuse, 2. Multiple sexual partners, 3. Prostitution
5. Increase use of friendly health services (support groups such as aunties / families / friends / cousins)
6. Ideas of prevention and harm reduction, and debunk cultural myths associated with gendered power, human health, and disease
7. Demystification of sex – talk about sex as Silence is a breeder of HIV
8. Empowering by highlighting similarities and differences among young people from throughout the Pacific region
9. Address socio-economic and cultural issues of the Pacific
10. Breach of confidentiality; the coconut wireless invades rights to privacy
11. Highlight the role young people play as Peer Educators and how they too can make a positive change or they also can be discriminating
12. Targets at prevention, protection, treatment, policy-making, and empowerment of the most vulnerable.

(B) Post Production outcomes:

13. Silence as metaphor to halt the HIV pandemic
14. National legislation to foster positive health outcomes and coordination
15. Educational tool kit to be an accompaniment for the production
16. DVD follow up of the production
17. Targets at prevention, protection, treatment, policy-making, and empowerment of the most vulnerable.