



Talanoa: COVID-19 pandemic and Pasifika young people



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VOICE: An ongoing initiative for community engagement

Talanoa: COVID-19 pandemic and Pasifika young people

In early 2022, Burnet Institute, Centre for Multicultural Youth (CMY) and Monash ActionLab commenced conversations to form a partnership to explore the public health needs of multicultural young people during pandemic recovery. As discussions progressed, the partners decided to take the approach of employing young people from multicultural backgrounds and mentoring and supporting them to build skills and deliver a piece of research and engagement in their own communities. Two project officers were employed by, one of whom was from a Pasifika background. The team worked together to identify an appropriate methodology for the work. It was determined that the following activities would occur:

1. Team workshops to establish a focal point for the project
2. Training and mentoring of the project officer to build appropriate skills and capabilities
3. Use of a broad engagement with young people to understand their experiences and needs
4. Synthesis of data collected during the broad engagement to identify a focus for co-design activities where a smaller group of young people could come together and develop something (e.g. a program, a product, a service) which could be implemented in their community to respond to their identified needs
5. Deployment of co-design and testing and iteration of what had been developed

The early workshops identified a focus on pandemic recovery as being relevant for the community. The team subsequently developed materials for the series of activities and submitted them for ethical review and received approval.

Method

The research methodology used in this project draws on Pacific Indigenous knowledge and methodologies to centre Pasifika ways of knowing and operating (Smith, 1999). For this project, the talanoa research methodology was used, where information was collected as 'a conversation, a talk, an exchange of ideas or thinking (Vaiolati, 2006, p. 23).

Through talanoa, we identified current and emerging needs and sought to develop an understanding of young people's experiences during the pandemic. Two talanoa sessions were facilitated by the project officer, with support from other Le Mana Pasifika, Monash ActionLab and Burnet Institute staff.

Participants

Approximately 30 young people attended the talanoa sessions. Participants in the sessions came from a wide range of backgrounds with varying countries of birth and migration experiences. Participants represented the three cultural areas

of the Pacific Islands: Micronesia, Melanesia, and Polynesia. Among the young people participating in the talanoa sessions were those from Fiji, Nauru, Tuvalu, Samoa, Tonga, New Zealand, and the Cook Islands. In addition to those born in Australia, a few who were born in New Zealand migrated to Australia with their parents at an early age, and several who were born outside of New Zealand and Australia.

The talanoa sessions were attended by young adults between the ages of 18 and 30. The participants included recent high school graduates, university enrollees, graduates, multicultural aids in schools, aged care workers, photographers, dance teachers, and community service workers among others. A small number of people were unemployed as well.



Key themes

During the COVID-19 pandemic, Pasifika young people have shown remarkable resilience. This resilience has occurred in the context of economic, social, and cultural hardships during lockdowns and restrictions. The participants described diverse experiences and discussed many significant issues that had affected their families and communities. While some of these experiences were common amongst the wider community, others reflected their particular cultural and social context. Pasifika young peoples' needs during the pandemic and following have been strongly shaped by their often limited access to services and supports, their mistrust of government and differing intergenerational experiences and beliefs which have been influenced by migration journeys and time spent in Australia, New Zealand and Pacific island nations.

By ensuring culturally appropriate engagement strategies, the talanoa method created an open dialogue on what were often sensitive issues.

This paper describes the following key themes that emerged during the talanoa sessions:

- Perceptions of COVID-19
- Education
- Employment and finances
- Family experiences
- Culture
- Social relationships
- Health and wellbeing
- Access to services and supports

Perceptions of COVID-19

Young people held a variety of theories about COVID-19. COVID-19 was widely believed to pose no real threat, as the statistics presented daily during news reports indicated high recovery and low death rates. Several people compared COVID to the common flu and said society simply 'lives with it'. Many people believe vaccinations were ineffective due to the high rate of breakthrough infections.

Considering the environment was and is so fluid, COVID-19 dialogue and information circulating in the communities changed over time, including misinformation and conspiracy theories. A few ideas persist, including that the drug companies wanted to sell their products and that the 3rd and 4th doses were unnecessary. Nevertheless, young people described trusting each other and encouraging open discussions about all sources of information.

A lack of awareness of translated COVID information and resources was consistently raised during the talanoa. There was a sense of shock among young people about the lack of resources, services, and translated materials. Throughout the talanoas, young people described wanting a greater level of communication from the government, including through the use of mainstream news sources and services, as well as other forms of media.



Education

Participants described the pandemic's impact on Pasifika young people in primary and secondary schools over the past two years, as well as the impact on parents and guardians. In some cases, young people believe online learning at home has increased parents' accountability and attention to their children; in other cases, it has increased pressure on parents. For example, parents need to be equipped with the knowledge to set up or understand the technology required to ensure their children are keeping up with attendance and classes or having adequate space to learn comfortably. The extra costs of setting this up also had an impact on families.

Transitioning from in-school to online learning from home was difficult for many young people. Participants expressed frustration because their schools did not provide resources or guidance on obtaining laptops or mobile devices, which were costly and cumbersome for their families. In many cases, young people felt that their education was at risk since they often shared their laptops or mobile devices with siblings. Some young people missed classes repeatedly due to siblings needing devices at the same time. For those studying VCE, several young people felt they were affected the most, and the transition from year eleven to year 12 was challenging due to missed social and educational interactions with their peers and teachers.

Many young people had to take on additional responsibilities in the home and in the community during the pandemic. Pasifika young women described being expected to assist with domestic duties and other roles. In contrast, their brothers and cousins did not have the same responsibilities. This led to young women having less time for study and class attendance. While these were described as cultural expectations and norms, young women participants in the sessions described these responsibilities as sometimes leading to anxiety, depression, and stress, as well as a drop in attendance, a lack of engagement, or even a withdrawal from school altogether, as experienced by a young person in one of the sessions.

The discussion of whether young people felt equipped to transition to higher education post-covid was met with hesitation, with several young people indicating they plan to enter the workforce rather than seek higher education. They discussed that this is because they feel pressured to contribute and support their families. Others stated they withdrew from the university during the pandemic to also enter the workforce and support their family.

During the talanoas, there was a general consensus that schools lack culturally appropriate approaches and engagement strategies to support Pasifika students. They believed that school officials' perception of Pasifika students is consistently negative, which makes them feel disempowered and unable to participate in school activities. Participants suggested that schools could benefit from cultural competency training to better understand Pasifika youth, which they believed would result in more positive outcomes.

Employment and finances

During the pandemic, it was revealed that many young people became the sole breadwinners for their families as one or more parents lost their jobs or were made redundant. They described this being a common situation for Pasifika households. While some young people noted they were able to obtain assistance through several government schemes that were relatively easy to enrol and access, others described a lack of awareness of what was available, limited access to technology, and difficulty navigating government services.

Young people described how lockdowns and restrictions led to significant increases in bills due to the constant home presence and rising living expenses. In the case of several young people, multiple jobs were undertaken to combat these extra costs in the household. Some young people also talked about increased spending on food apps such as UberEats and MenuLog and online shopping despite a lack of employment, shorter work hours, or job loss. The talanoa identified a significant need for education and resources around financial literacy for Pasifika young people.

In addition to the increased family responsibilities imposed by lockdowns and restrictions, young people reported difficulties with working from home during the pandemic. Several people expressed difficulties in maintaining work/life balance, experiencing burnout and impacts on their mental health. Many were unaware of available support and services.



In contrast, several young people found themselves enjoying the situation given their workplaces had already supported flexible work arrangements before the pandemic; however, the social aspect of workplace interactions was missed.

Although young people believe they were supported in their daily work tasks, they also felt their workplaces lacked cultural awareness and understanding when dealing with issues affecting them. For instance, a workplace would not allow a young person to take bereavement leave because the funeral was not of an immediate family member but of an extended family member or the broader community.

Family experiences

Many Pasifika households contain multiple generations and possibly even more than one family in the one household. In this context, it can be challenging for young people to navigate two identities: Australian-born Pacific Islanders or Australian-raised Pacific Islanders influenced by their traditional ethnic background and culture. The difficulty in navigating intergenerational differences was a common theme identified throughout the talanoa sessions.

In a traditional Pasifika household, it is often the role of women to be carers (elders and young children), leaders of domestic duties, and cooks, as well as other functions. In contrast, the part of the man is to provide financial stability and security. Many young Pasifika women experienced mental health issues due to the cultural differences in domestic expectations and roles between men and women.

Participants also described families forming closer bonds, learning more about each other's cultures, languages, and families during the time spent together, and siblings developing stronger bonds. Thus, young people were able to support each other a lot more throughout the period.

Culture

Young people described how the Pasifika community is based on trust and that physical interactions and social connections are fundamental to a sense of community. As a result, many felt that strict pandemic measures took away a significant part of the culture during this period because of the restrictions and rules in place. Pasifika peoples' identities and well-being were stripped away whenever families and communities were forced to separate. The young people discussed how this adversely affects the engagement of the community, families, and individuals and that this impact is persisting now.

As we continue to move away from online engagement, young people have identified a need for culturally appropriate community events. Promoting cultural and traditional protocols, such as beginning and ending each session with prayer, could make these events more effective. They also described the importance of acknowledging community leaders and traditional chiefs or heads of systems or hierarchies of ethnicity.

Social relationships

In order to maintain their mental health, young people described the challenge of feeling the need to prioritise friendships and physical closeness over adhering to rules and restrictions. Several young people revealed that they still find it challenging to enter public spaces, participate in social settings, and have fears related to crowds and public spaces. Many young people have been experiencing post-covid anxiety, making it difficult for them to build new relationships, engage socially, and reconnect with others.

Others turned to their faith and religion to better cope with the circumstances, which saw the formation of prayer groups, friendship catch-up sessions, and talanoa forums using online tools. Young people considered that social connection is a critical tool to continue using in engaging young people moving forward. Pasifika young people also believe that more community events (as described above) would mean that they feel more comfortable entering social spaces and would be encouraged to reconnect with fellow young people and community members.



Health and wellbeing

Throughout the talanoa, it became a recurring subject that young people continue to be severely impacted regarding their mental health. Young people began to unpack how the pandemic highlighted ongoing problems at home and among family members. Since mental health is a cultural taboo, many young people, and in particular young women due to expectations around their roles and responsibilities in the family, found it difficult to discuss their feelings and emotions openly with others and often received dismissive comments from older family members.

To better handle the circumstances young people found themselves in, some turned to other methods of coping including vaping, smoking, excessive drinking and food consumption, online gaming and excessive spending which they found negatively impacted their health and wellbeing. Many young people talked about putting on a 'brave' face, disregarding their health and wellbeing in the process.

Access to services and supports

Confidence in using mainstream support services emerged as a significant issue during the talanoa sessions. It became clear that many people felt distrustful and lacked knowledge about how to access and use services effectively, leading to other means of coping. A general lack of awareness around the types of support and services available was evident.

A significant factor in distrust of services and lack of engagement can be ineligibility due to visa or migration status. Many Pacific Islander and Maori families and young people migrate to Australia from New Zealand. Entry is usually through a 444 visa but is possible through protected and non-protected visas. Consequently, young people living in Australia on a 444 visa, and their families, are ineligible for a range of services and supports, including many social security benefits. This has the potential to make them more vulnerable to experiences of disadvantage and exclusion.

While some young people did use government and mainstream support services, they found these services to be bland, sterile, and sometimes incompetent. Several young people attempted to obtain support but had trouble identifying appropriate resources. Pasifika young people further stated there is a lack of culturally relevant approaches and that staff are generally not culturally competent, which discouraged them from utilising services beyond initial interactions.

Future directions

In order to engage Pasifika young people, it is critical that culturally appropriate settings and consultations are used to collaborate with them on identifying a path forward. Directions to emerge from the talanoa include the need for more culturally appropriate and culturally competent schools, workplaces and support services. Key needs in the community have been identified in relation to mental health and wellbeing and more opportunities for development of social, family and community relationships and dialogue.

These talanoa sessions, along with other engagement with Pasifika young people in the activities of the Le Mana Pasifika program at CMY, have revealed the need to strengthen the next generation of Pasifika leaders and voices and continue to build resilience within the community. Therefore, the first step is to seek guidance and knowledge from the community. The second step is to acknowledge all ethnic groups, understand their cultural nuances, and respect their traditional and cultural leaders. Following the establishment of a respectable relationship, we can then support, consult with, or 'talanoa' with community leaders and key actors to identify their next leaders, such as the Le Mana Wayfinders established under the Le Mana Pasifika project team.

The Le Mana Wayfinders is a voluntary group of Pasifika young people that have been identified as the next generation of leaders. The Wayfinders gather with a common interest in advocating for local change for Pasifika young people. Its purpose is to consult with, advocate for, and advise on Pasifika young people's issues in the City of Casey, Greater City of Dandenong and the City of Cardinia. It is for those who are aged 15-25 who live, work, and study or have significant links to the listed Local Government Areas (LGAs).



The Le Mana Wayfinders have played an active role in supporting the project with their ongoing advocacy of key issues affecting them as well as through the recruitment process and participation in the talanoa sessions. As a result, Le Mana Wayfinders have acknowledged the importance of 'talanoa' and how it can be an opportunity to engage more Pasifika young people as well provide a safe space for dialogue and collaboration.

With the assistance of the project partners there is now an opportunity to support the Le Mana Wayfinders through training and mentoring to enhance their knowledge and skills in leadership. By supporting the use of talanoa in their ongoing activities, it can allow them to practise their facilitation skills as well as identify new and emerging opportunities / issues affecting their peers and community.

Facilitator reflection

We all must realise the immense power of cultural awareness in breaking down barriers and bridging gaps between different cultures. This awareness not only enables us to love, respect, and appreciate people from diverse backgrounds but also enhances our ability to communicate effectively with individuals with varied cultural experiences. By embracing this approach, we increase our chances of connecting with other cultures, reducing conflicts, and optimizing the use of resources and services.

Throughout our journey of recovery, it remains crucial to prioritize the needs of the most vulnerable members of our community: women, people with disabilities, children, youth, and the elderly. Ensuring their active participation in planning and implementation processes is paramount. Traditional engagement strategies have proven inadequate due to cultural incompetence, but by empowering communities to bolster their cultural resilience and knowledge, we can achieve far-reaching outcomes. These aspects should be thoughtfully integrated into our plans, activities, and solutions.

In the planning stages of this project, we recognized the significance of the talanoa methodology, a cherished form of discussion and engagement in the Pacific Island nations. As the facilitator and a fellow member of the Pacific Island community, I embraced my responsibility to connect with participants using the talanoa method, enabling their voices to be truly heard. Talanoa serves various purposes, allowing participants to express their feelings, behaviours, and attitudes based on their cultural values and beliefs. Its relaxed and open environment fosters genuine connections, underpinned by humour and warmth. I've witnessed firsthand how cultural spaces are not just about being heard but also about effective communication and personal growth, guided by our cultural etiquette, protocols, and principles that embody the essence of talanoa.

In the face of pandemic challenges, various online platforms such as Twitter, Zoom, Facebook groups, and WhatsApp have emerged as invaluable spaces for fostering connections and engaging Pasifika young people in diverse activities. Witnessing young Pacific Islanders share their narratives and relate to one another on a personal level has been truly uplifting. These virtual spaces, marked by safety, comfort, and inclusivity, have become avenues for sharing both positive and negative experiences, as echoed by many participants during our talanoa sessions.

The creation of talanoa spaces as part of this project has offered young people a comparable experience, allowing them to express their stories freely. It is our duty to continuously extend such spaces to all Pasifika youth. Taking a person-centered approach and actively involving Pasifika young people in their own conversations builds trust within the community, empowering them to shape their own stories.

Moving forward, our aspiration is to empower Pasifika young people to utilize talanoa as a means to break intergenerational cycles. By sharing experiences and voices, not only among peers but also with families and parents, we can foster healing, support the creation of safe spaces, identify emerging needs, and advocate for open and secure dialogue. The significance of oratory skills in our traditions underpins the importance of this endeavour.

To conclude, I acknowledge the privilege of serving as the project officer and facilitator in this project. I recognise that being a member of the community entrusted with this role comes with great responsibility. Rest assured; every effort will be made to ensure the best possible outcomes for our young people. Their voices and experiences are invaluable, and it is essential that they actively participate in shaping, designing, and implementing the project's outcomes. Together, we can create a truly transformative initiative.



My heart is devoted to fostering healing, understanding, and empowerment within our community through cultural awareness and inclusive engagement. Let us continue this journey of cultural exchange, connection, and growth, overcoming challenges with the collective strength of our community. As we honour the wisdom of talanoa and uphold our cultural traditions, we pave the way for a more harmonious and inclusive society.

In closing, I extend my heartfelt gratitude to all those who participated in talanoa sessions, contributing to its success. Your courage and willingness to share your stories have been the driving force behind our progress. Together, with determination, compassion, and a profound sense of responsibility, we can make a lasting impact in the lives of our Pasifika youth.

Vinaka vakalevu (Thank you very much).

Next steps

Talanoa sessions were well received by participants, and they wanted more sessions to serve as a regular gathering place for young Pasifika people. To bring more diverse experiences to the group, participants suggested including other communities as well as allowing more time for ice breakers and questions overall in future sessions. The recent success of the 'talanoa' space has led to suggestions that the Le Mana Wayfinders incorporate it into their work plan as a regular activity. Pasifika young people can use this as an opportunity to share stories, experiences, and learn from each other in a safe, comfortable, and inclusive environment. Moreover, it will provide further opportunities for reaching the most disengaged youth. As a final suggestion, participants suggested focusing part of the talanoa on possible solutions, such as ways to engage parents.

The partners involved in this project are proposing that the co-design phase of the project focuses on collaboratively designing modules for a leadership and mentoring program for young people in the 18+ age group whereby these young people can be trained and supported to become leaders in their community, to enhance engagement skills with younger members of the community, support their development and knowledge of Pasifika and western cultures, assist in the facilitation of talanoa and traditional protocols and to strengthen capabilities in advocacy, community events, workshops, and on-ground delivery.

Suggested modules for the program that could be co-designed are as follows:

1. Develop and Support Community Leadership
2. Youth Voice and Engagement
3. Overcoming stigma and building safety
4. Advocating for services and systems change

In addition to co-designing the above modules, there are some existing materials that co-designers can seek to build on and further adapt as follows:

1. Navigating Two Worlds / Two Hats
2. Cultural Learning and Tools of engagement

Young people who attended the talanoa sessions will be consulted to seek their input on the appropriateness of these modules and whether others should be included in the co-design process.

Project partners



