
Church-based service provision for street-frequenting young men in Suva, Fiji

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Abstract

This paper draws from the results of research with street-frequenting young men in Suva, Fiji. It specifically discusses the interventionist work of Christian-based organisations with street-frequenting young men who through the lenses of spatial ordering and ideological transgression are constructed as being 'out of place'. Church organisations work to reclaim the perceived lost childhood and youthful status associated with a street-frequenting existence. In doing so they adopt a 'basic needs' approach characterised by the provision of food and to a lesser extent shelter. Whilst popular, this approach is limited in that it fails to address the structural and discursive positions that place street-frequenting young people on the margins of society. The paper concludes with a call for meaningful engagement with street-frequenting young people in an effort towards recognising their right to existence and survival.

Introduction

Suva, the capital of Fiji is fast becoming a space of many contradictions. Against the backdrop of a formal administrative centre, business hub and entertainment precinct of the country exist the reality of a growing informal sector and issues that accompany development and growth, like unemployment and mushrooming informal settlements to name two. There has also been a notable presence of street-frequenting young men. These are young men who spend much of their time on the streets, existing in what they call the 'system' where they either work, hang out or simply have fun. This existence characterised by their transgression of public space and the assumption of a street identity embodied in work, style, leisure and resistance is viewed by mainstream society to be problematic and a cause for much apprehension. As a result street-frequenting young men invite surveillance and gaze from authorities and create a 'moral panic' in public discourse. This discourse of deviance offers the government, church organisations and non-government organisations (NGO) the mandate for intervention (Panter-Brick, 2002; Enne and Swart-Kruger, 2003).

This paper discusses specifically the interventionist work of Christian-based organisations with the street-frequenting young men of Suva. Interventionist strategies with children and young people on the streets are often diverse and driven by different ideological positions, ranging from that which perceives children as a public nuisance and a threat, as individuals needing protection, or to those that see them 'as human beings whose fundamental rights have been violated' (De Benitez, 2003, p. 9). It is important to mention at the outset that Suva hosts only a handful of direct and dedicated intervention initiatives for street-frequenting young people. While other organisations now work on the streets of Suva those discussed here are the ones that existed during the time of the study. They adopt 'protective' strategies that view street-frequenting young men as vulnerable thus arguing for the need to protect and attend to their needs (De Benitez, 2003). In essence, I argue that interventionist initiatives in Suva are constructed around the assumption 'of how childhood ought to be' (Hecht, 1998, p. 157).

Saving and protecting street-frequenting young people: Provision of basic needs

By the nature of their existence, the street-frequenting young people attract the attention of a range of individuals, groups and organisations that make up their 'network of relationships' on the streets, and who become a source of assistance and support which they periodically seek and receive. Unlike Rio de Janeiro where 'one study counted 39 institutions that catered exclusively to street children' (Hecht, 1998, p. 149), the situation in Suva is different. The work of direct social services with street-frequenting young people is dominated by Christian church organisations. On a general scale, however, there exists variation in the degree, nature and period of involvement by different church organisations. For example, the Seventh Day Adventist Church (SDA) began its food service for street children in 1996 but has since stopped. The same periodic response to street children and young people can be seen in the Methodist Church who according to Rev Manasa Lasaro, were the first to provide food for street people but discontinued this service because it became an expensive exercise as the number of patrons kept on increasing (M. Lasaro, personal communication, December 8, 2004).

The only known street work and service for the young people at the time of this study was the food service provided by two church organisations, namely the 'Love Kitchen' of the Wesley Church and the 'Care Ministry' from the AOG church at Calvary Temple. Chevalier Hostel provided night shelter to the young people. Recently an organisation, known as 'The Rescue Mission', has been receiving much publicity in the local media about its work with marginalised young men. These organisations are guided by salvation-based principles, reflective of their basic Christian dogma (Hecht, 1998). This is well summarised by Pastor Tom Osborne when describing the reasons why his SDA youth group first embarked on feeding street children in 1996:

... that was an idea that I created with my own young people, and basically our definition was merely to be a good Christian and to live out our Christian duty in helping people we have identified that need help. Basically, I challenged my own young people about, what would Jesus do? That was the selling line for them...and also carrying out of Christian duty (T. Osborne, personal communication, December 9, 2004)

Food services

The provision of food is the most practical and often the only means of assistance offered to the street-frequenting young men by concerned organisations. One of the earliest known

organisations to have been originally involved in the provision of this service is the SDA Church. Pastor Osborne gave a brief history about its first involvement with feeding the young people on the streets:

...the young people came back and identified homeless street kids, and we sat down, worked out ways in which we could address the problem. After a few more visits they identified that one of the difficulties that this group faced was the basic necessities of life, like food. We identified with the young people which days were the most difficult for them to find food. They all unanimously agreed that it was Sunday. So at the beginning of 1996 our little Church group began feeding young people. We identified 50 young street kids or homeless people there, and invited them for Sunday lunch. This was a program we ran for 12 months, the whole of 1996 (T. Osborne, personal communication, December 9, 2004).

The food service stopped because Pastor Osborne felt that the young people needed more than just food. During this time his group identified that the young people turning up to eat had issues relating to alcohol, drugs and sexual and reproductive health. This prompted the SDA Church to develop a life skills programme facilitated through camping excursions (T. Osborne, personal communication, December 9, 2004).

As earlier mentioned the provision of food for street-frequenting young men at the time of the study was provided by the 'Love Kitchen' and 'Care Ministry'. For the young people eating at both these locations involves a ritualistic process. Meals are only served after a short Christian devotion session which includes the reading of a Bible passage, a short sermon and a prayer. The sermon which is led by a volunteer at the eating spaces is specifically intended to help the patrons reflect upon and realise their need for spiritual nourishment and how they can practically live out the teachings of the Bible. From my observations it was obvious that the intentions of the feeding programmes extended beyond meeting the immediate sustenance needs of the street-frequenting young people. It was apparent that feeding service providers used the interactive opportunity to share their faith as well as to influence behavioural changes with the young people. In addition, concerns had been raised about such programmes influencing faith changes but no evidence of this was forthcoming during the study. As Hecht (1998, p. 166) puts it:

Salvation is based on the notion that street children exist in a sort of hell or, at best, purgatory on earth. To be rescued from this state, street children must be reinserted into a recognisable form of childhood.

Rev. William Powell of the Wesley Church is familiar with the work of the 'Love Kitchen', reflects Hecht's words by saying that:

The Love Kitchen serves more than just a plate of food and a glass of juice. It also serves as an opportunity for understanding those who have problems and finding constructive ways of helping them and developing them if they are willing to become better citizens of Suva...we would love to see the percentage improve in terms of those making a change, a re-conversion to a better life (W. Powell, personal communication, November 16, 2004).

Rev. Powell's views were similar to those shared by the volunteers at the eating spaces pointing to the fact that behavioural change or conformity to the rituals of the eating spaces by the street-frequenting young people is interpreted to indicate success in having effected perceived positive change for the young people. This was further exemplified during one

of my conversations with the Mr Aliferti Ritova, leader of the 'Care Ministry' about what he considers as a positive outcome of the service they provide (Lalakato, 2007). Mr Ritova relayed how he on a particular Sunday, took a busload of homeless people including some street children who accessed the Care Ministry's food space to church. The very fact that there were some in the group who were still sobering up that morning was a significant achievement for him. I sensed a feeling of accomplishment in his story in that he managed to take to church those perceived by mainstream society to be sinners and outcasts (*Author's Learning Journal*, Phase1, November 2004).

The ladies at the 'Love Kitchen' conveyed similar sentiments to those expressed by Mr Ritova, one of elation when talking about how they have seen the young people develop and mature since they opened the Kitchen. They talk about how street-frequenting young people can be saved and transformed. In fact their reflections resonated around the possibility of reclaiming and saving children and highlights the significance of the role played by human emotion that is influenced by a changing opinion when working with young people on the streets (Hecht, 1998).

It was evident from the numerous visits I made to the Love Kitchen that this genuine effort of assistance by the ladies is well appreciated and admired by the young people, particularly when they note that such work is very difficult for others to do. This is a common reaction by street children elsewhere in the world as such meal services often formed 'part of their survival strategies' (Van Beers, 1996, p. 197). Apart from this sincere show of appreciation I also noticed that the young people actually engaged in the practice of 'shifting identities' when accessing the Love Kitchen. What the ladies interpret as success and positive change in playing out this ritual may only be a performance on the part of the young people in order to get that decent meal. When the ladies talk about success they are referring to the young people being well groomed, developing acceptable mannerisms like washing their hands before meals and saying 'thank you' after each meal. This interaction, performative as it may be, seems ideal as it serves the interests of both parties involved. However, this presents the need to explore successes of such programmes beyond the immediate service delivery space.

Residential care

Suva hosts a number of residential homes for disadvantaged children and young people including the Suva Boys Centre which houses juvenile offenders. Chevalier Hostel established in 1981 by Fr. Kevin Barr is the only residential facility for underprivileged young people in Suva and houses an average of 15 young people between the ages of seven and 24 on a long-term basis. The children and young people that reside at Chevalier are there for varying reasons that range from being victims of broken homes (through divorce, death, separation or desertion) and domestic issues (caused by fighting, unemployment, alcoholism, poor housing, etc) to unsupportive and abusive family environments (Vakaoti, 1998).

Chevalier Hostel is atypical of institutions and can be contrasted to Goffman's (1991) 'total institution'. It is very open and exists like a family setting reflecting the Apollonian perception of childhood where children and young people are in need of nurturing and protection. In this context the children and young people are offered the comforts of a normal home, have role models in the form of volunteers, and at the same time are expected to perform chores like that of any normal child or youth within a home. Those of school age are supported

to stay in school and those who have dropped out encouraged to access either formal or vocational education. Out of school young people are engaged in some form of employment like shoe shining as idleness is unacceptable at the Hostel (Vakaoti, 1998). Chevalier Hostel as an institution exists to offer a substitute to the family where disadvantaged children and young people can experience a normal childhood and become functional members of society. However, this strategy has been criticised for 'being grounded in western middle-class values' and one far removed from the reality of life experienced by the young people under institutional care (Dybicz, 2005, p. 766).

Given resource and space limitations the Hostel is only partly able to extend its protective service to street-frequenting young people in the form of night shelter. Like the feeding services, the young people are only entitled to a comfortable space to spend the night before they head back to the streets in the morning. Despite this many young people are grateful for the opportunity and have developed an emotional connection with the hostel. At times those young people who access the hostel spend more time there than usual, particularly during weekends. On a particular Monday morning Alex, whilst having a meal at the 'Love Kitchen', excitedly shared with me his weekend experience at the hostel. He spoke about having a good time watching DVD movies and having full meals. I sensed much contentment in the tone of his voice particularly when he relayed how he and the usual residents all ate their meals together and washed up later (*Author's Learning Journal*, Phase 2, September 2005). These rare opportunities experienced by street-frequenting young people like Alex, demonstrate their appreciation of being included and doing things their peers in 'normal' settings did.

Recognising their rights and mobilisation

In many countries particularly in Latin America, Africa and South-East Asia, the rights and participation discourse for children has had significant implications in intervention work with street children (Liebel, 2003; O'Kane, 2003; Pare, 2003). Pare (2003) notes that in Brazil, the rights of street children and their participatory abilities are now more explicit than ever before. To this effect, street children were involved in the drafting of the country's new constitution and are having their voices heard in areas concerning family and societal reintegration. Similar processes are recognised in the work of Street Kids International, a Canadian-based international organisation for street children (Sauve, 2003) and the Butterflies Programme for street children that has existed in Bombay, India since 1998 (O'Kane, 2003). These organisations in their work with and for street children have programmes reflective of the contributions of the children themselves, their experiential knowledge and reflective thought processes and suggestions (O'Kane, 2003; Sauve, 2003).

Initiatives of this nature have yet to materialise in Suva and protective strategies accorded to street-frequenting young people allow them no opportunity to participate and contribute in the services they receive. It is necessary that Christian-based services through a rights-based framework recognise street-frequenting young people as a distinct group of young people, and that their status deserves special mention and recognition. This is due to the fact that their lifestyle and existence is at odds with that which is expected of a normal child (Pare, 2003). According street-frequenting young people due recognition will ensure that work with them is more binding and sustained.

Conclusion

This paper has discussed faith-based interventionist work with street-frequenting young men in Suva, Fiji. There is limited direct work with the young people on the streets where existing services are either reactive or protective in nature. Drawing mostly from perceived moral panic, interventionist work by faith-based organisations is influenced by an array of socio-cultural, legal, moral and salvation-based positions. These in effect perpetuate an element of control over street-frequenting young people. This reflects Hewitt and Smyth's (1999, p. 217) assertion that, 'responses to street children, to put it crudely, appear to be more a function of the respondents' needs rather than anything to do with children's needs'. Such an ideological position claims an element of success in the high number of patrons they attend to, and the behavioural changes they claim to have witnessed in the lives of the street-frequenting young people they serve.

The perceived success of these initiatives can, however, be interpreted to exist only as an illusion for the service providers. This is because the young people tended to engage in a ritualistic performance of subservience at the food service and assistance spaces. The young people know that their day-to-day survival in part depends on such service provisions and the role they play maintaining the public transcript during these interactions (Scott, 1990). This display of agency or the 'shifting identities' on their part demonstrates their ingenuity and creativity in aspects of their lives that in most cases go unnoticed, or are understated by adults and service providers.

The acknowledgement of children and young people's agency and their right to participate in decisions that affect their lives is progressively being given due recognition in Fiji. This shift in the perception of children and young people, has on a number of occasions and through certain initiatives, been extended to street-frequenting young people. Such initiatives provide early signs of progress towards recognising the unique and different state of existence of street-frequenting young people particularly the role they play in their own self-determination. Street-frequenting young people are here to stay and recognising this in official and societal discourse will ease the acceptance of a shift in ideology that listens to their voices and offers them options for the many life paths that are now existent in a globalised Fiji.

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