Weaving rainbows in Oceania: Multiculturalism in Pacific education

Cresantia Frances Koya-Vaka'uta

✠ Weaving ✠

> *Pacific   Women   Weave*
> *Weaving   woven   patterns*
> *Pictures   in the   loom of life*
> *Mosaics   of culture   and family*
>
> *My grandmother wove pandanus leaves*
> *My mother wove fabric*
> *I weave words and sound of chanting dreams*
> *My daughters will weave*
> *in a computer digital age*
> *Of webbed complexities*
> *continuing to weave*
> *on the age long tradition*
> *Of Pacific women weaving stories*
> *Of who we are*
> *And who we chose to be*

✠ Re-tracing ~ old weaves ✠

Today, more than thirty years after the 1970 UNDP/ UNESCO South Pacific Curriculum Project found Pacific education to be irrelevant both in content and process, educators are finding that there has been inadequate curriculum change in three key areas. These are: 1) relevance of content and process; 2) teaching methods; and 3) the production of suitable teaching aids and texts. In fact, in many cases, the situation appears to have worsened. Not only is education still based on passive rote-learning, it is still also academic-centered, content-based and examination-driven (Sadler and Sharma 2000:278). Thaman (2002:24)

attributes this continued lack of development to the maintenance of colonial practices: "Today, our schools continue to reflect the … curricula of the formal education systems of our ex-colonial masters" she writes, and Jowett (1998:15) agrees:

> Even now…Pacific Island countries still carry strong vestiges of their colonial education structures, systems and content. This has been typified by the lack of curriculum development that best suits the majority of their peoples despite the wide range of assistance from donors and educational consultants.

The UNDP Pacific Human Development Report (1999:85) states that, while access to basic education is a major concern for some islands such as Vanuatu, Solomon Islands and Papua New Guinea, other challenges facing Pacific Island countries (PICs) in general include: teacher shortage, linking education to national economic growth, increasing efficiency of public and private sectors, promoting national identity and culture, and resolving the growing mismatch between skills and livelihood opportunities.

This paper focuses on the issue of national identity and culture. Its purpose is two-fold. Firstly, it explores the need for social learning through multicultural education in Pacific education systems. The discussion goes on to argue that an understanding of multiculturalism in education is important, given the increasingly diverse societies of PICs in the 21st century, as it enables children to see how diverse communities (made up of many groups: religious, ethnic, etc.) can function through effective interaction and communication. It is based on the assumption that an education system which encapsulates social learning will ultimately better prepare students for their local and regional context as well as the globalised world into which they will soon emerge.

Secondly, the paper discusses the use of a multiculturalist approach to curriculum development through the adoption of MC Ed, which could improve cross-cultural awareness and increased voluntary interaction through a better understanding of others in diverse communities.

❖ Conceptualising ~ the need for a new weave ❖

With a view to improving Pacific education systems, an NZODA funded colloquium was jointly undertaken by the University of the South Pacific and the Victoria University of Wellington in April 2001. Bringing together 18 Pacific educators, its purpose was a re-thinking of the "…values, assumptions and beliefs underlying education in Oceania [as well as]…the main issues and challenges facing education" (Benson 2002:iv).

Papers presented at the colloquium (Thaman 2002; Taufe'ulungaki 2002; Puamau 2002; Sanga 2002) argue that a re-definition of Pacific education requires a transition from the current, colonial-influenced, Eurocentric system to a more focused conceptual framework within which relevant and contextualised educational content and processes may be constructed. What this means is that a Pacific vision for Pacific education is needed.

To begin to question the Pacific vision of educational purpose and focus, I would like to adapt ideas from two western theorists. The first is John Dewey (1916) who said that "the school is a microcosm of society" and the second is Paulo Friere (1921 – 1997), who advocated education as 'liberation' in his famous *Pedagogy of the Oppressed*. I believe that these two ideas are central to developing an education that is tailor-made to our needs, and rooted in our Pacificness: our languages, our cultures and our ways of learning.

The important question is: Education for what? In my view, Pacific education must prepare students for the reality of life beyond the walls of the classroom and the schoolyard. It must be a preparation for life, not focused only on passing academic examinations or on employment. Its purpose would be to inculcate values and character that would enable full and positive participation in both local cultural community life and national life.

The ultimate outcome is a well-informed, conscientious citizen of the nation, the region and the world. Such an outlook would ensure recognition of multiple ways of knowing and doing. Subramani

(1995:177) argues that "...societies that will impose a one-dimensional view of reality will not be able to sustain themselves for very long…." As I see it, in order to sustain Pacific societies, education must be based on the recognition of multiple realities, must facilitate the development of multiple skills and should enable the development of multiple identities. This means that a holistic and inclusive framework of education is essential.

The plurality of society is a fact of life which has led to conflict and misunderstanding, as we have seen in the Pacific of late. Examples are: religious conflict, racial conflict, indigenous conflict, tribalism, and even disputes over gender and sexuality issues. Subramani (2000:1) argues that such conflicts indicate "…the failure of education to improve intergroup relationships [and this] has directed attention to the need for a re-examination of the aims and objectives of education". How we choose to address this plurality is the real issue at hand.

Subramani (2000:1) advocates an education that recognises and addresses the reality of diversity in both the local and global community. What this means is that increased cross-cultural awareness and meaningful interaction between groups is needed. Such an approach would help to remove barriers that currently exist such as stereotyping, racism, ethnocentrism and all forms of discrimination. This is in line with the Delors Report to UNESCO of the International Commission for Education in the 21st Century, which concluded: "Living together in harmony must be the ultimate goal of education in the 21st Century" (Delors *et al.* 1996:235).

The Solomon Islands Education Strategic plan 2002-2004 takes this into consideration when it states:

> …there is an acceptance that education has increased tensions with communities…The education system is seen by many as being unconnected and antagonistic to the social and cultural values on which Solomon Island communities and society is based…Education must be available to all regardless of gender, ethnicity and socio-economic background of citizens. (Ministry of Education, Solomon Islands 2002:1-2).

What we want for our students is that at the end of the day they, as citizens, are able to see each other as equals, recognising both similarities and differences in world view and seeing the world as it is, rather than through inflexible Eurocentric lenses (Matsumoto 2000:80). It is like the sudden realisation that light is not white, but is a spectrum of colours as they diverge and converge through mirrored prisms.

✠ Weaving ~ the Pacific past and present ✠

Weaving a mat is basically the crossing and overlapping of dried leaves. This can be used as an analogy to represent the crossing of paths – where people come together from different pasts to cross and overlap in the present, forever changing the course of the mat that is our Pacific life. The dried leaves are our roots, our culture and language, who we are and where we have come from. The overlapping of fronds is the touching of lives and sharing of the present, and the mat is the very fabric of our existence which encompasses it all: our past, our present and our future.

Multiculturalism has often been misunderstood because it has "two often contradictory prongs" (Kalantis and Cope 1985:83). These are 'ethnic politics' and 'cultural pluralism'. The first advocates social equality by identifying those who are socially disadvantaged and attempts to address these issues. The second promotes the celebration of diversity. The first attempts to transform society through equity based policy and the second "…merely wishes to describe society as it is, in order to celebrate its diversity" (Kalantis and Cope 1985:85).

What multiculturalism means in education is educating for understanding and appreciation of diversity. The ethical approach would be multiculturalism in education that recognises and addresses issues of diversity.

It is also important to make the distinction between the terms 'multicultural' and 'multiculturalism'. The first is the fact of cultural diversity and the second is the normative response to that fact. Multiculturalism views differences as valuable and inseparable to a

healthy society. According to Parekh (2000:7), differences may not be valued or appreciated in multicultural contexts, so it is important that we recognise that use of terms such as multicultural, multi-religious and multi-ethnic is for purely descriptive purposes. Multiculturalism goes beyond description and implies taking action to address the plurality that exists. What this means by definition is that a multicultural state is one in which there are many people of diverse backgrounds. In this state, there may or may not be an appreciation of the differences. On the other hand, a state that promotes multiculturalism is one which is multicultural in nature and also has policies in place that address the diversity.

Speaking of recognising and acknowledging diversity comes easily, but actively responding to that diversity raises issues of acceptance, tolerance and understanding and this is more difficult. It means establishing common core values which can act as a platform on which to build a common identity, while at the same time celebrating the differences among cultures as well as enriching and empowering people culturally.

The true face of multiculturalism is not that of assimilation. Rather, it is one that embraces a multiplicity of worldviews and ways of life, while at the same time bringing people together in the spirit of connectedness and sharing of a nation, region and world. As Veitayaki (1995: 28) states: "Any new perspectives of ourselves must be based to a large extent on our roots. We should look into our histories and traditions as well as into our cultures, for ideas and inspiration". A multiculturalism that best fits the Pacific context is, therefore, one that ensures "the evolution of a nurturing national culture … [and] demands a contribution from all respective cultures and becomes a mosaic of adaptations and ways of life"(Koya-Vaka'uta 2002:74).

When we look back on the 'mat' of the Pacific, we see that the vision of educating for diversity is rooted in who we are and in our coming together. The analogy of the mat as the Pacific is appropriate because mats are used across the region for various purposes. We all use mats in one form or another, in our daily lives. They epitomise who we are, where we are.

⚑ Rainbows in Oceania ~ the issue of diversity in education ⚑

Each personal cultural past and traditional history are facts which cannot be denied. It is also a fact that culture and tradition greatly influence our worldview and perspectives of life. Through promoting multiculturalism in education, we are advocating the development of many perspectives (Archie 2001:4). Recognising the validity and authenticity of other cultures and worldviews, in addition to one's own, is the ultimate goal.

Psychologist Rowe (1987:56) quotes the Talmud: "We don't see things as they are, we see things as we are." Rowe herself maintains that:

> Reality, whatever that may be, does not come directly to us but is shaped and structured by the way our senses and our language create the structures which we call meaning. …Everything we perceive has meaning…Perception is meaning. Meaning is perception. We cannot step outside our world of meaning. (Rowe 1987:55)

Therefore, in order to develop education for multiculturalism, any perceived threat of different cultures, languages and ways of doing must be removed through greater understanding in order to encourage the development of multiple perspectives and identities.

Multiculturalism in education would provide the sociological and psychological balance that is needed to promote positive inter-group relationships within and between communities. Education is thus better contextualised and relevant to the needs of the group(s) that it serves. This means taking into consideration culturally appropriate ways of learning (styles) and traditional ways of doing and thinking (lifestyle and worldviews) and accommodating these in the formal education system.

Multicultural education takes multiculturalism into the education system by responding to increasingly multicultural contexts and environments, but it goes beyond ethnicity by incorporating issues of

socio-economics such as poverty, access and equity, gender, sexuality, special needs, ethnicity, and religion. Here, we can address the multifaceted dimensions of our society by acknowledging each learner's needs and experiences and valuing them. Nieto (1992:208) defines multicultural education thus:

> Multicultural Education is a process of comprehensive school reform and basic education for all students. It challenges and rejects racism and other forms of discrimination in schools and society and accepts and affirms the pluralistic (ethnic, racial, linguistic, religious, economic and gender, among others) that students, their communities and teachers represent.

This ideology neatly fits into the philosophical framework of the proposed policies of the Solomon Islands Education Strategic Plan 2002-2004 (Ministry of Education, Solomon Islands 2002:2) as it advocates the inclusion "…of ways of thinking, reasoning and understanding and ways of doing things…[as well as]…languages, literature, culture, history, modern technologies, the sciences and the arts". However, what must be assured is that the initiation of such policies be seen through to implementation and evaluation stages, as this will continue to improve and strengthen the education system in the long term.

Subramani (2000:303) identifies four core aims for such an education. These are:

- to enable students to gain confidence in their self image;
- to develop in students positive expectations from education that assures continuity of education;
- to enable the classroom to become a democratic space which promotes open dialogue and communication to allow for personal and social education, and
- to encourage a cooperative learning atmosphere as opposed to a competitive one.

These aims are important if we want an education system that acknowledges and validates students' diverse backgrounds and improves access to and opportunity in education for all students.

The teaching and learning about diverse groups for diverse groups must be rooted in future-based policies that recognise multi-faith education, the teaching of universal values and moral education, as well as cultural and multicultural education. Such an approach must go beyond a superfluous cosmetic level of simply knowing about diverse groups. It must inculcate understanding to take a closer look at *who* people are culturally, their traditional history, their values and ways of life, as opposed to where they live, how they live and what they do. In fact, it moves beyond the *what* and *where* questions to the *how* and *why*. This helps create three-dimensional perspectives rather than one-dimensional generalisations or stereotypes.

Critics may argue that multicultural education itself is a foreign or western concept. This is true. It originated in the USA in the wake of the Civil Rights Movement (Sobol 1990, cited in Burnett 1998:1). However, it is extremely relevant as it is not Eurocentric in focus and is an attempt to conceptualise education to suit the needs of the ethnically and culturally diverse population and workforce demands. It recognises that colored people are disadvantaged by Eurocentric formal education systems and makes an attempt to address their needs and the needs of other disadvantaged groups through a more democratic system that considers the learning needs of all.

The next section discusses a proposed modular approach for multicultural education in the Pacific to address issues of diversity through an inclusive education.

⚙ Weaving Rainbows ~ from theory to practice ⚙

In the case of multicultural education, I would like to suggest a modular approach. The model is an integrated approach to multicultural education through multicultural analysis. It is represented diagrammatically on page 34.
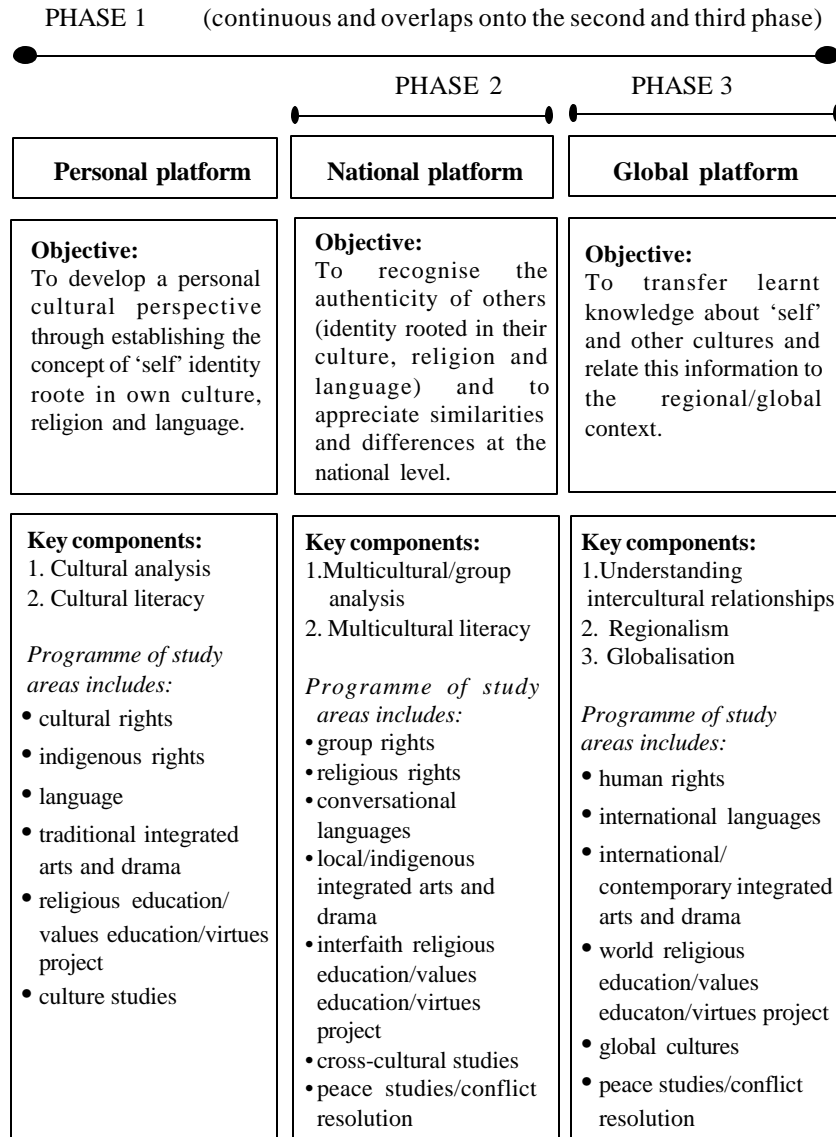
The model is spread over the primary and secondary years, by incorporating materials and content, and adapting teaching styles that are suitable for each age group.

Phase 1 – This is the initial phase, beginning at pre-school or class one and going up to class 5 or 6 level. This is built around the concept of cultural analysis. The opportunity is here provided for children to establish themselves in their culture and identity. It does this through the learning of their culture, traditional myths and legends, art and handicraft and learning about the core values of their respective cultures. The focus is on the development of a positive personal identity. Thaman (1994:15) defines this as cultural literacy which she defines as "…a specified level of competence in shared knowledge, understanding and values of one's culture that enable members (of a particular group) to know their cultural roots and to effectively communicate with one another."

Phase 2 – This stage begins at about Class 5 or 6 level. Here, movement is outwards, allowing students to recognise the validity and authenticity of other cultural groups in their communities. The opportunity to learn something of other languages, art forms and history is provided. More importantly, this phase enables students to begin to draw parallels between different groups and this is the early stage of the concept of multiple perspectives. The focus, here, is on a national identity.

Phase 3 – The final phase, which commences at secondary school, focuses on the development of a regional and global identity so that students are better able to conceptualise their place as citizens of the region and world. Students can look at ways that their culture(s) have changed as a result of contact—issues such as the missionary and colonial influence, the impact of the consumer culture on the market economy, the media, modernisation, regionalism and globalisation. The exploration of these issues must be objective and balanced so that students are able to weigh for themselves the negative and positive outcomes of the various forms of contact their society has experienced over the years.

Developmental Model for the Multiculturalist Approach to Multicultural Analysis

PHASE 1   (continuous and overlaps onto the second and third phase)

PHASE 2   PHASE 3

Personal platform	**National platform**	**Global platform**
Objective: To develop a personal cultural perspective through establishing the concept of 'self' identity roote in own culture, religion and language.	**Objective:** To recognise the authenticity of others (identity rooted in their culture, religion and language) and to appreciate similarities and differences at the national level.	**Objective:** To transfer learnt knowledge about 'self' and other cultures and relate this information to the regional/global context.
Key components: 1. Cultural analysis 2. Cultural literacy *Programme of study areas includes:* • cultural rights • indigenous rights • language • traditional integrated arts and drama • religious education/ values education/virtues project • culture studies	**Key components:** 1.Multicultural/group analysis 2. Multicultural literacy *Programme of study areas includes:* • group rights • religious rights • conversational languages • local/indigenous integrated arts and drama • interfaith religious education/values education/virtues project • cross-cultural studies • peace studies/conflict resolution	**Key components:** 1.Understanding intercultural relationships 2. Regionalism 3. Globalisation *Programme of study areas includes:* • human rights • international languages • international/ contemporary integrated arts and drama • world religious education/values educaton/virtues project • global cultures • peace studies/conflict resolution

In this phase, students my be exposed to international languages and could be given the opportunity to study different forms of art from various cultures around the world.

What is important here is the contextualisation of the 'self' in the local community, the nation, the region and the global context. The process of relating personal rights to collective group rights; cultural, religious and indigenous rights; the rights of others; basic human rights; women's rights and children's rights also reinforces this contextualisation. This process would also demonstrate the relationship between rights and responsibilities of the individual and the collective, in light of others rights and responsibilities, thus contextualizing the 'I' in the 'all of us' of human rights.

The use of such a model can produce optimal results only if curriculum development is thorough and due consideration is given to initiation, implementation and institutionalisation processes. The four key areas that must be given priority are: teacher education and preparation, epistemology (content), pedagogy (process) and community participation.

Tavola (2000:471) states that "...education is not just about knowledge and skills; it is also about values and attitudes". This is true not only for students and communities but also for teachers. Not only do teachers have to understand the dynamics of the multicultural classroom, they should also undergo a cultural analysis to allow for self reflection. This would enable them to more successfully facilitate multicultural learning. Trainee teachers would undergo learning experiences that would facilitate the development of cultural and multicultural literacy as well as cultural, cross- and multicultural competencies. These skills are essential to enabling a more effective teaching process and learning experience for both teacher and students.

The model is based on the Culture Sensitive Curriculum ideology which Thaman (1996:7) speaks of. She talks about the need for cultural and multicultural sensitivity in the teaching and learning process to "…make our teaching and our students' learning an even more rewarding experience". Such an approach to curriculum development must begin by sensitising teachers to a variety of cultures, beliefs and value systems,

and ways of doing, knowing and learning. Such an analysis requires a firm acknowledgment of one's cultural identity and recognition of the validity of other identities which may be similar or different from one's own. This means that cultural, cross-cultural and multicultural awareness becomes an integral part of any teacher training programme.

Furthermore, through positive community input and stakeholder participation, relevant content materials and culturally sensitive methods of teaching and learning can be promoted. This includes input from other ministries, non-government organisations (NGOs), civil society organisations (CSOs), religious groups and various communities. This would mean that inter-ministry approaches to educational reform are encouraged. Moreover, NGOs and CSOs whose mandate includes related issues must be consulted. In this way, inclusion of issues of gender, sexuality and minority groups is ensured.

⬚ **Woven Rainbows ~ multiculturalism in Oceania** ⬚

Pacific educators must work together to develop a Pacific education that is designed specifically to suit our needs and address the challenges that our smallness and diversity present. I believe that multicultural education could do this if it is developed to incorporate our 'Pacificness'. Multicultural education becomes inevitable in the light of diversity and globalisation. According to Gorski (2000), multicultural education aims for social change and this change requires three strands of transformation. "These are: transformation of self, transformation of school's teaching and learning and transformation of society".

Such an approach to education would encapsulate the essentials of congruent living in the plural world we live in. According to Satir (1988:368-370) these are:
- To communicate clearly
- To cooperate rather than compete
- To empower rather than subjugate
- To enhance individual uniqueness rather than categorize

- To use authority to guide and accomplish 'what if's' rather than force compliance through the tyranny of power
- To love, value and respect ourselves (and others) fully
- To be personally and socially responsible
- To use problems as challenges and opportunities for creative solutions.

In the Pacific, what we need is an education system that provides real learning experiences for our children so that they receive a holistic education that nurtures their full development into rational, critical and altruistic citizens of the future. We need an education system that liberates our children, one that gives them a basic education of literacy and numeracy, opens up opportunities to improve their living conditions, improves their access to the job market and simultaneously opens their minds, broadens their worldview and provides them with multiple perspectives to see the world as it truly is.

⚑ **Weave ~ Weaving ~ Wove ~ Woven** ⚑

These four verbs describe the process of developing education for diversity. Weave—the concept; weaving—the process; wove— self-reflection; woven—the end product.

Weaving rainbows in Oceania, for me, means learning that in order to see a rainbow, you first encounter rain. The journey toward greater cultural, cross-cultural and multicultural awareness may be rocky and rough, but the end goal of a peaceful existence makes the journey worthwhile.

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