

Situating the 'local' as curriculum transformation in Timor-Leste

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Abstract

Transformation of the nation is reflected powerfully through transformation of primary school curriculum, the opportunity for the state to direct particular understandings of the world, the nation and the community through mandated content and teaching strategies. Education in Timor-Leste has historically reflected outside interests, attempting to shape Timorese into citizens of other countries or communities rather than a specifically Timorese view of what children will learn. This paper traces the influences on Timorese education, from the early 20th century until the current curriculum, identifying how 'local' content has been understood in official documentation, classroom materials and by classroom teachers. It notes that despite the current teaching materials firmly focused on living in the community, "local" is often aligned with serving national interests. It suggests considering more closely the opportunities to re-contextualise learning toward the lived experience of Timorese children in using new content and pedagogy.

Keywords: Post-colonial education; Timor-Leste; primary school; curriculum; nation-building

Introduction

Transformation of small states into independent entities entails balancing global parameters for development – articulated in the *Millennium Development Goals* and the subsequent *Sustainable Development Goals* – while foregrounding the local and culturally-particular that may reflect hard-won battles for independence. As education represents an important lever of nation-building (Ansell & Lindvall, 2013; Mebrahtu, Crossley & Johnson, 2000; Rizvi, 2007; Tickly, 2001), tensions between a postcolonial identity and globalisation can be reflected in the goals of curricula. In the case of Timor-Leste (Note 1), the vote in 1999 and subsequent restoration of independence in 2002 began a transformation of the small nation in all sectors of political, economic and social life, articulated in the first development plan: "East Timor will be a democratic country with a vibrant traditional culture and a sustainable environment" (East Timor Planning Commission, 2002, p. xviii). Foregrounding "traditional culture" within the national goals provides the basis of the first of the principles underlying the current primary school curriculum, "Ligasaun ba kultura no maneira moris lokál nian [*Connection to culture and way of local life*]" (Ministério do Educação [ME], 2014, p. 18).

This paper draws on government and curriculum documents to explore how external influences – colonialism, occupation and globalisation – have shaped Timorese education, in contrast to the current curriculum, that moves towards more local and contextualised learning for children with a strong focus on the "way of local life". As an insight into how teachers understand such a principle, some recent

survey data indicates that teachers see their work strongly as a national endeavour and some general understandings of local adaptation. With teachers a group of particular interest in the global pursuit of “quality education” (see UNESCO, 2015; World Bank, 2018), framed as “filters for any change initiative” (Dembélé & Lefoka, 2007, p. 534), it is their understandings and value of local life that will be translated into classroom practice. This study, then, suggests it is crucial that teachers have the support to recognise the opportunities to adapt the curriculum to Timorese life, thus provide context and purpose for students’ learning, particularly as they are products of former systems where the Timorese context was not a feature of school-based learning.

Research approach

Data for this paper was largely derived through content or document analysis, a qualitative methodology used to “provide knowledge and understanding of the phenomenon under study” (Downe-Wamboldt, 1992, p. 314), in this case, the ways in which education for Timorese students has understood with local meanings and experiences. Close attention to wording of documents provides the opportunity to identify patterns and themes (White & March, 2006), revealing how values and attitudes are expressed and “illuminating the themes and ideologies which give meaning to pieces of writing” (O’Connor, 2019, p. 67). Krippendorff (1989, p. 403) suggests that this is “one of the most important research techniques in the social sciences”, providing a view as to meanings are attributed to particular individuals or groups.

In this study, the context is that of primary school education in Timor-Leste since the late colonial period (20th century) and the sample of documents are government documents, research reports and educational materials sourced as on-line and hard copy, through repositories such as the Australian National Library and the Timor-Leste Archives in Dili as well as the author’s collection over 20 years working with educational agencies in Timor-Leste. These sources present words and images from various periods of Timorese educational history, indicating ways that education for Timorese has been represented. While historic documents were not extensive – due to availability – Portuguese governmental records illustrate the changing emphases on education provision in the then-colony. In more contemporary times, of particular attention are the curriculum documents and teaching materials, such as anthologies and textbooks, produced by the Ekipa Reforma Kurrikulár Edukasaun Basika [*Basic Education Curriculum Reform Team*] since these represent the current ways curriculum is provided to teachers, children and the community. Coding for the analysis was based around identifying instances of wording around “education”, “local” and “Timorese” to understand how these concepts were understood in combination. As an important aspect of content analysis, the author has been able to “contextualize what they are reading in light of what they know about the circumstances surrounding the text” (Krippendorff, 2004, p. 87), through a deep knowledge of the situation built through long experience working in Timorese education.

To reflect on how current understandings in official documentation compares to how teachers understand their work within the national and local contexts, results from an *exploratory study* (Onwuegbuzie & Teddlie, 2003) undertaken in June 2019 are highlighted. This survey was undertaken with 18 schools in various locations –

within town, outskirts of town and rural – yielding 86 completed papers from teachers across a range of ages and teaching experience, and who were teaching classes across primary school (Years 1 – 6). While this is only a small proportion of approximately 7500 primary school teachers (Note 2), it does provide an overview of how teachers understand particular aspects of their work and attitudes to the current curriculum. Teachers were presented with statements about their work and asked to agree or disagree, with further space to comment or a specific prompt for further information (See Quinn & Buchanan (2021) for extended discussion of the survey results). Teachers' responses were analysed to identify the patterns and themes that emerged across the sample, adopting a grounded approach (see Strauss & Corbin, 1994) in respect to the qualitative data gathered through their comments. Of interest to this paper are the responses to items about the curriculum generally, why teachers did their job and what they understood by the principle of “local life” and how this aligned with educational documentation and understandings of “Timorese education”.

While conclusions from this paper are only representative of the materials and views that surround Timorese education, they do point to the emerging “Timorisation” of education, which could be strengthened with greater attention to the affordances of the local community context.

Education globally in the 21st century

As Timor-Leste emerged as a nation, the new millennium saw widespread activity around identifying globalised norms and goals for schooling, exemplified by the acceptance of *Development Goals* and the emergence of the *Education for All* agenda and Dakar framework (United Nations Educational, Scientific and Cultural Organization [UNESCO], 2000). International accountability toward such goals has encouraged some convergence of ‘given’ ideas of what constitutes quality education from a World Culture standpoint (Anderson-Levitt, 2003; Baker & LeTendre, 2005; Dale, 1999; Raminez, 2012), ways of seeing schooling and the teacher's role (Kim, 2010). The risk is that such a global standpoint does not necessarily reflect the educational realities of a particular nation. While Dale (1999, p. 3) suggests that the “globalization is not a homogeneous process, nor are its effects homogeneous”, small states such as Timor-Leste are particularly vulnerable to global imperatives since they lack the economic or political force to resist the influence of larger states' agendas (Brock & Crossley, 2013). Further, reliance on aid brings not only funds, but the pressure to accept concepts of education shared by donor countries and agencies (Kiernan, 2000; Schweisfurth, 2015; Tabulawa, 2003). A ubiquitous concept is the adoption of “learner-centred” pedagogies, identified through the *Global Monitoring Report* (UNESCO, 2005) as “a focus on the learner” (p.24) and conflated with improved learning outcomes.

Postcolonial theory, however, would suggest space for a focus on the local in transforming educational systems in the face of such global agendas, drawing on those “animating concepts of post-colonial theory such as place, identity, difference, the nation, and modes of resistance, focus on the particular” (Rizvi, 2007, p. 260). Tickly (2001) further suggests that the state and other civil players have a role in “mediating the influence of global forces” (p. 155) in transforming local curriculum. Where national policies have become sites of policy borrowing and symbolism (Jansen, 2002), teachers as local actors have a role in interpreting centralist policies

to better serve their own understandings of learner needs (Vavrus & Barlett, 2009). Resistance to the adoption of some pervasive teaching practices – e.g. group work, dialogic discussion – have been observed in the case of Timor-Leste (Shah & Cardozo, 2016; Shah & Quinn, 2016), with teachers uneasy about ceding “control” of classroom activity to students within the more traditional models of classrooms.

Localised curriculum development in small states, then, grapples with balancing the influences of global norms with local needs. Amadio, Operetti and Tedesco (2015) suggest that education requires a local interpretation and implementation fit for learners, reflecting on “what education is needed and for what type of society” (p. 4), echoing the earlier work of Delors et al (1996) in their pillars of learning to know, learning to do, learning to live together, learning to be. Such consideration is particularly important for newly-independent states as they use education to reflect the type of society they seek to build, a new society influenced by their history and, in many cases, their struggle to exist. Timor-Leste’s particular setting, geography and history have influenced the development of the current curriculum.

Background to Timor-Leste

Timor-Leste, a country of nearly 1.2 million (Direcção Geral de Estatística [DGE], 2015), is a small half-island state within the Indonesian archipelago, barely 700km from Australia, rich in culture variation across 30 linguistic groups (Eberhard et al., 2019). Since winning the vote for independence from Indonesia in 1999, the country’s population has swollen, with 50% of the population currently under 24 years of age, including 25% in the 5 – 14 years age group, providing significant challenges for government services, particularly the Education Ministry (Note 3). At the same time, Timor-Leste’s Human Capital Index is well below regional averages and health indicators for babies, children and adults are below global growth standards (see World Health Organisation, 2020), with community health a major area of concern.

For 500 years, Timor-Leste was the furthest colony in Portuguese expansionism, a tropical land with a rugged interior, described in 1944 by an early governor, Teófilo Duarte

[o] nome de Timor, sinónimo de terra de clima horrível, que matava ou inutilizava fatalmente, o que provinha do descohecimento quase absoluto do interior que era magnífico [*the name of Timor, a land synonymous with a horrible climate, which killed or rendered useless, which came from the almost absolute ignorance of the interior, which was magnificent*] (Duarte, 1944, p. 24).

This interior, or *foho* in Tetum, is shorthand for any place outside of the capital, Dili, or the few larger towns, the home of the *maubere* and *povo*, the local people (Arenas, 1998). Local lives are closely bound up with this environment (Bovensiepen, 2014; da Silva, 2017):

Os timorenses têm a sua íntima relação com terra, ar, água, plantas, animais, o sol e a lua, que sustentam a vida humana na sua originalidade existencial [*Timorese have their intimate relationship with land, air, water, plants, animals, the sun and the moon, which sustain human life in its original existence*] (da Silva, 2017, p. 153)

The majority of the population live in villages that cling to the side of

mountains throughout the spine of the country or along the coastal fringes, engaged largely in subsistence agriculture. These villages, too, constitute the sites of traditional forms of knowledge, of “usos e costumes” (*uses and customs*, coined by Portuguese colonisers), those objects, beliefs and rituals that form the basis of Timorese culture and knowledge (Silva, 2011). The symbol of this traditional knowledge are the tall sacred houses, *uma-lisan* or *uma-lulik* as the centrepiece of the village. More than merely ceremonial, Tilman (2012, p. 192) explains that “the community considers *uma-lisan* is central part of their identity, and they have deep significance in people’s everyday lives”. Thus, traditional knowledge rooted in the land directs and shapes people’s lives, making them truly Timorese.

Another strong theme of Timorese identity is that of resistance, Duarte (1944) describing the then-colony as “o estado de permanente insubmissão das populações nativas [*the state of permanent non-submission of the native populations*]” (p. 24). Resistance was first manifested in rebellions against Portuguese colonisers, personified in the hero Dom Boaventura (see Arthur, 2019). Later, throughout Indonesian occupation, not only the resistance front, Fretilin, and its armed wing, Falantil resisted, but the sustained efforts of local people (see Rei, 2007, for example) shaped what it meant to be Timorese. Even schools became sites of conflict, with students protesting and resisting mandated Indonesian policy and teaching (Arenas, 1998).

Thus, in understanding the “local” of Timor-Leste, geography and history have sustained and protected the population, and provided the context for the *ai-knanoik* (traditional stories and legends), *ai-knananuk* (traditional songs and verses for rituals and parties), the poets of the resistance such as Borja da Costa and even Xanana Gusmão, as well as more contemporary writers (see Moutinha, 2011; Soares, 2006). The history of colonisation, occupation, resistance, resilience and victory overlay traditional ways of understanding the land and the ancestors. Thus, in transforming the curriculum, Rizvi’s concepts of “place, identity, difference, the nation and modes of resistance” (2007, p. 260) present strong influences on Timor-Leste’s response to global concepts of education and what students should learn in schools.

Phases of Timorese education

Portuguese colonial education

During Portuguese colonial times, schooling was in the hands of Catholic missions with some later governmental policy towards compulsory, universal primary education: aos europeus como aos indígenas sendo para uns e outros igualmente gratuito e obrigatório [*both Europeans and Indigenous alike, being free and compulsory for both*] (Governo da Colonia de Timor [GovCT], 1916, p. 147). However, in reality, education was reserved for Portuguese nationals and some Timorese elite. Speaking more generally about the nature of colonial systems, Santos, Meneses and Nunes (2006) suggest that colonial governments “implant” themselves – “a implantação de impérios traduziu-se, no mundo das colónias [*the implantation of empires was translated, into the world of the colonies*]” (p. 20) and this was the case in Timor-Leste, with the school curriculum replicating that in Portugal, the *Metropóle*, teaching “história de Portugal, princípios de geografia e corografia portuguesa, alguns conhecimentos sobre as possessões portuguesas

[*history of Portugal, principles of geography and Portuguese heritage, some knowledge about Portuguese possessions*]” (GovCT, 1916, p. 147). Education was designed to strengthen the Timorese “possession” of Portugal.

Later policy nominated space for local adaptation, differentiating Timorese of the “interior” as distinct from Portuguese nationals:

sobretudo nas escolas do interior, modificar êste programa de modo a torná-lo mais fácil, prático e aplicável as circunstâncias locais e necessidades dos povos timorenses [*especially in rural schools, modify this program in order to make it easier, more practical and applicable to local circumstances and the needs of the Timorese people*] (GovCT, 1927, p. 6).

Rural schools were encouraged to use the *lingua franca*, Tetum (currently a co-official language of the nation, with Portuguese): “Nas escola do interior, o ensino deverá ser inicialmente ministrado em tetúm [*In the rural schools, the teaching should be initially taught in Tetum*]” (GovCT, 1927, p. 6). While the use of Tetum provided some access to the curriculum, education was Portuguese-looking, providing a link to the West and the opportunity to experience Lusophone culture and literature (Wu, 2000), but without consideration of what a Timorese population might need. This critique from 1975 identifies the problems in the content offered to Timorese:

obrigava as crianças da 4 classe a aprender os rios, as montanhas, as cidades e as linhas férress de Portugal, da Guine, de Angola, de Mocambique, da "India Portuguesa" e de Macau, enquanto e qeografia de Timor se dicavam apenas meia duzia de linhas! [*4th class children have been forced to learn the rivers, mountains, cities and railway lines of Portugal, Guinea, Angola, Mozambique, "Portuguese India" and Macau, while Timor's geography has been only half a dozen lines!*] (Grupo Coordenador Para a Reformulação do Ensino em Timor [GCRET: *Coordinating Group for the Reformation of Education in Timor*] 1975, p. 10).

As attendance figures for the 1973/74 school year indicate that 77% of the primary school-aged children were receiving this education (GCRET, 1975, p. 4), Portuguese culture was embedded across the population.

A significant shift toward local needs emerged in the final year of the colony, as post-dictatorship fervour in Portugal signalled a pending independence for Timor-Leste. Popular education in communities was already spreading, mobilised by young, educated Timorese teaching Tetum literacy (see Cabral, 2019). In early 1975, the GCRET, comprising Portuguese and Timorese educators, proposed a new curriculum based on Timorese reality:

O que o ensino em Timor precisa, fundamentalmente, é de ser timorizado. Timorizado nos conteúdos, timorizado métodos, timorizados nos objectivos. E para isso tem que ter em conta a realidade Timor [*What teaching in Timor needs, fundamentally, is to be Timorese. Timorese in content, Timorese methods, Timorese objectives. And for that it must take into account the Timorese reality*] (GCRET, 1975, p. 10).

A principle of this movement was that education should have a greater focus on agriculture and village life, since this is where so many of the people lived and worked. The coordinator, António Barbedo de Magalhães (2016) later described how the group worked closely with teachers to reform the education system and curriculum to build strong links to Timorese culture and realities. The planning also emphasised vocational education to train those in villages better respond to local needs. However, despite the work to enact the transformation, a local political coup

in August 1975 and the arrival of Indonesians in December 1975 meant that this curriculum was never enacted.

Thus, documents from colonial times show that while education was largely Portuguese content and orientation toward a European model, the latter years saw an “accommodation” of Timorese language and culture, with the promise of a Timorese-oriented education quashed by the arrival of the Indonesians. While the envisaged changes to education were not universally accepted in 1975 with opposition from the Catholic Church (Magalhães, 2016), such work did bring to consciousness what a Timorese education system might look like.

Indonesian education in Timor Timur.

In becoming *Timor Timur*, the 27th province of Indonesia, Timorese schools became organs of the Indonesian state, under the auspices of *Pancasila*, the “five principles” identified by President Sukarno in 1945 as a unifying philosophy for Indonesian independence (Fatlolon, 2016). These principles included supporting the Indonesian nation, with education as a vehicle to develop good Indonesian citizens (Arenas, 1998,). Despite a stipulated 20% “local content”, (Arenas, 1998; Pederson & Arneberg, 1999), the post-independence report into truth and reconciliation, *Chega!* (CAVR, 2005, p. 48) noted the “use of schools for propaganda and indoctrination” was core to the Indonesian state.

Indonesian education in Timor-Leste during this period was characterised by largely academic-focused curricula, with little in the way of vocational education (Pederson & Arneberg, 1999). This was despite the fact that the majority of Timorese worked in agriculture or local livelihoods and of those engaged in administrative and professional positions, most were non-Timorese (Jones, 2001, p. 257). Thus, schooling did not address the local needs of the Timorese population, or prepare them for a life that reflected their reality.

Over the 24 years of occupation, Indonesia implemented global goals of universal education, ensuring most children attended school (Nicolai, 2004), yet achievement results for Timorese children were among the poorest in the archipelago (Beazley, 1999). Thus, the education offered Timorese children did not serve their educational needs or accounted for their lives, seeking only, as Arenas (1998) argues, to create a population loyal to Indonesia.

Timorese education post-independence

In 1999, Indonesia granted the Timorese a referendum to choose independence from Indonesia. Echoing the preparations of 1975, the Conselho Nacional de Resistência Timorense [CNRT: *National Council for Timorese Resistance*] convened a conference in Melbourne to begin planning for an independent nation, with education identified as a key lever in establishing a Timorese state (CNRT, 1999). With the vote overwhelmingly for independence, the Indonesian army unleashed widespread violence and destruction across the country, resulting in the loss of schools, materials and teaching staff (World Bank, 1999). All schooling stopped.

Resuming school and sourcing teachers and textbooks became a priority in this time of emergency and transition to a local system (Millo & Barnett, 2004; Nicolai, 2004), and some opportunities were taken to “Timor-ise” education. Initially, Indonesian textbooks were hastily reprinted with a Timorese flavour: photos of Timorese children were inserted, along with a preface by the resistance hero, Xanana Gusmão (Nicolai, 2004, p. 110). However, as Portuguese was designated an official language, textbooks were procured directly from Portugal and distributed, despite not being designed for the vastly different Timorese experience.

In the rush to provide some form of schooling in these early days, external interests heavily influenced the development of Timorese education. In their analysis of early educational activity, Millo & Barnett (2004) note that decisions lacked broad-based consultation and consensus about what constituted Timorese education and opportunities were lost through the heavily-handedness of global actors such as the World Bank and the multinational United Nations Transitional Administration for East Timor [UNTAET]: “CNRT and other Timorese representatives did not trust UNTAET and the World Bank with a responsibility as sensitive as the formation of the new generation through educational transformation” (p. 734). However, the authors also suggested that with the formation of a stronger government toward independence in 2002, it was time to develop a locally-generated curriculum:

Only now can a collective model of educational transformation be formulated, legislated for, and implemented. It is essential that future efforts properly consult and engage with local communities in the processes of transformation. (p. 735)

Certainly, the planning documents that emerged in 2004 in preparation for the first primary school curriculum included the principle of “locally-based” among the global principles democratic, child-centredness (MECJD, 2004, p. 24). The advice to teachers was that content and teaching should be “Kontestualizadu liu, ativu liu, integradu liu, relevante liu, efesiente liu [*More contextualised, more active, more integrated, more relevant and more efficient*]” (MECJD, 2005, p. ii). In this spirit, Tetum language teaching materials for Years 1 and 2 were developed in Timor-Leste under the auspices of the Dili-based Mary MacKillop Foundation and later the Education Ministry, using stories of Timorese children and animals in local situations.

Portuguese language books from this period, however, present a view of Timorese identity is tightly still bound to the Portuguese commonwealth and history. In the analysis of her own and others’ Portuguese language books designed for Timorese children between 2006 and 2008, Fonseca (2018) notes that in teaching Portuguese, the materials “contribui para a consolidação da identidade linguística e cultural de Timor-Leste [*contributed to the consolidation of linguistic and cultural identity of Timor-Leste*]” (p. 98), echoing the sentiments of Timorese leaders, such as Gusmão, captured (undated) by Batoreo (2010, p. 59): “O português é a nossa identidade histórica, [*Portuguese is our historical identity*]”. In positioning Timor-Leste firmly within the Lusophone world, the Year 6 language textbook – *8 mundos, 8 vozes* [*8 worlds, 8 voices*] (Soares, Solla & Fonseca, 2008) – is solely focused on the countries that make up the Lusophone community (Angola, Brazil etc), rather than regional or global realities. Language activities in the texts reflect a “communicative” approach, using samples of Portuguese conversations in localized situations of the village or between family members, neither accounting for the

multilingual reality of Timorese communities or the use of Portuguese for more formal or official domains (see Taylor-Leech, 2009).

This first post-independence curriculum for primary school presented a number of problems in regard to addressing learning needs of children. In his critique of this early curriculum, Shah (2012) contends that “policymakers have constructed a new state curriculum without broad consensus on what it means to be a nation” (p. 31). He notes that the curriculum was written largely in Portugal, with little public consultation or consideration of local needs, and used materials donated by Portugal that lacked to Timorese students (p. 36). For example, in her later study of curriculum reform, Ogden (2017a) notes that teachers often mentioned this curriculum’s use of pizza slices to explain fractions, a food not known outside a few Dili restaurants, underscoring how the early curriculum set up significant obstacles to understanding curriculum concepts. Other issues Shah notes include ignoring Tetum as a stronger classroom language (pp. 34 – 35), particularly when students and teachers had little grasp of Portuguese in these early days, and the lack of attention given to the recent, but formative history of the country (p. 36).

Post-independence, the Timorese government made significant progress in increasing enrolments across formal education, with over 90% of children enrolled in basic education (Years 1 - 9), a doubling of primary school teachers and nearly 60% increase in the number of primary schools since 1999 (ME, 2011, pp. 20-21). However, educational data from 2011-2017 (see Note 2) shows high drop-out rates, rising in primary school: 2% in 2011, 4.6% in 2017. The highest rate of drop out is at Year 1, and more lately at Year 4, with Year 1 also having the highest rate of repeating students, 24% in 2017. At the same time, the government notes that

Many teachers began their career with poor subject knowledge, weak pedagogical skills and did not have full working competency in the two official languages of instruction in Timor-Leste (ME, 2011, p. 134)

Thus, the government faces a considerable challenge to provide education that is relevant to children, and supporting an under-prepared workforce, a problem of learning as well as of teaching.

The government’s vision for 2030 is that “all students ...are taught by well-trained and qualified teachers, so they receive a quality education” (ME, 2011, p. 134). Thus, curriculum for Timorese children needs to provide the means to successful learning as well as teachers who have been prepared sufficiently to understand how to deliver quality teaching.

Development of a Timorese curriculum, 2013 – 2015

Primary school curriculum reform was again instigated in 2013 by the then vice-minister for education, Dulce de Jesus Soares, seeking to provide a curriculum that realised the national vision for education, addressed the concerns outlined in the issues outlined by the *National Education Strategic Plan 2011 – 2030* (ME, 2011) and other commentators (such as Shah, 2012), to design a “Timorese curriculum”. The changes ultimately made to content, pedagogy and policy were established by Decree Law 4/2015 (RDTL, 2015), enshrining the new curriculum in law.

This new curriculum was informed by both international and local practice, with a multinational, multilingual team of international and national advisors along with teachers from various disciplines brought together to develop the curriculum

principles, syllabus and content frameworks (ME, 2014). Implementation work entailed scripted lesson plans for every subject plus all materials required to enact the lessons. The work was undertaken with wide community consultation, across more than 110 local and international organisations and individuals working in Timor-Leste, education, community and government entities (ME, 2014, pp. 7-9). Initial and on-going consultation collected input into how a Timorese curriculum might be conceived and developed, and to share progress, receive feedback and build shared understanding about envisaged changes to content and pedagogy. This process resembled the consultation undertaken in the 1975 curriculum reform by the GCRET (Magalhães, 2016).

To meet the Education Ministry's identified weakness in teacher knowledge and skill (2011, p. 134), scripted lesson plans are used as a means of developing teachers' content and pedagogical knowledge. While scripted lesson plans have been contested (e.g. Commeyras, 2007; Dresser, 2012), they can provide high support to guide teachers into new ways of teaching (Schneider & Krajcik, 2002), in this case, to enact participatory pedagogy: opportunities for students to discuss, experiment and wonder about their learning. Despite many years of programs espousing child-friendly and learner-centredness (e.g. UNICEF'S *Child Friendly Schools*), Timorese classrooms had been found to have little student activity (Shah, 2012; Shah & Quinn, 2016), thus scripting classroom activity is considered a way of stepping teachers into new practices.

Such pedagogy, however, presents some tensions between what teachers existing practices and the new intentions. In reporting teacher attitudes to the new curriculum, Ogden (2017a) notes mismatches between the curriculum writers' intent – particularly of international staff – and what teachers understand and believe. The latter typically view the approach as “foreign”, without the focus on teacher control and authority through tightly controlled teaching strategies, as seen in earlier studies (Quinn, 2013; Shah & Cardozo, 2016). One teacher captured on video as part of the same study (Ogden, 2017b) expresses his distaste for this new classroom “democracy”:

In the past in Portuguese times, it was a dictatorship, kids paid attention. They knew how it felt to be hit. Now we have democracy, and you can't get mad at anyone. So now when the children misbehave, you can only watch, not like before (subtitled clip, translated from Tetum)

While the curriculum framework indicates that the teacher is intrinsic to classroom activity – “Manorin lidera atividade oioin ho klase hotu, grupu, pár, ka individuál, hodi envolve estudante sira hotu no liga konteúdu ba sira-nia esperiênsia. [*The teacher leads various activities with the whole class, in groups, pairs or individually, involving all students, linking the content to their experiences.*]” (ME, 2014, p. 225) – the comments suggest that teachers may feel some pressure of concepts from outside having too much influence on their work.

The curriculum also gives a strong emphasis on student agency in learning, that “Estudante sira bele koko halo, husu, kaer, no buka-hatene rasik [*Students can try to make, ask, have and find out themselves*]” (ME, 2014, p. 225). In a recent study by a Timorese researcher, Monteiro (2019) notes that teachers felt children were not ready for this responsibility:

segundo as narrativas dos entrevistados, as crianças em Timor-Leste ainda não estão bem preparadas para assumir a responsabilidade das suas próprias

aprendizagens [*according to the interviewees' narratives, children in Timor-Leste are still not well prepared to take responsibility for their own learning*] (p. 165).

However, this and a similar contemporaneous study into teachers' use of the new curriculum (Soares, 2019) find general acceptance for the new ways of teaching as the means to positively influence student learning.

Os participantes consideram que as mudanças que ocorreram trazem vantagens às aprendizagens dos alunos [*The participants [teachers] consider that the changes that have occurred bring advantages to students' learning*]. (Soares, 2019, p.125).

Thus, the new curriculum has ambitious goals in supporting teachers and students to ways of learning, yet the approaches may present challenges in seeing that such ways-of-doing suit the conditions of the Timorese context.

“Localisation” in the curriculum, 2015

In seeking to design appropriate and relevant learning for children, the current curriculum attempts to account for Timor-Leste's history, geography, politics and cultural diversity:

Relevánsia aprendizajen liga ba oinsá kurríkulu ne'e responde ba nesesidade sosiál, kulturál, no comunidade nian, hodi aplika koñesimentu no abilidade hirak-ne'ebé hetan iha eskola ba situasaun réal moris nian. [*Relevant learning links to how this curriculum responds to social, cultural and community necessities, in order to apply knowledge and abilities built in school to real situations in life*] (ME, 2014, p. 23).

Since “real situations” for the majority of the population occur in villages and communities, the first of the three underpinning principles of the curriculum is based on connecting to the local ways of life: “Ligasaun ba kultura no maneira moris lokál nian [*Connection to culture and way of local life*]” (ME, 2014, p. 18). This section will identify the ways in which the current curriculum and its materials reflect the local context, with a strong focus on learning about and through Timorese experiences. The discussion will move from the wider syllabus planning, through the content choices and then to teaching materials.

In terms of the *syllabus*, subjects include those found in most curriculum documents in school settings: language, mathematics, natural science, social science, art and culture, health and physical education. Language learning reflects the nation's official language policy – Tetum and Portuguese – but also the fact that Tetum is more widely used (DGE, 2015), thus the language for initial literacy. A particularly Timorese addition to the art and culture subject is the strand of permaculture, a focus on creating and maintaining gardens for food production through sustainable agricultural processes. Identifying agriculture as a discipline strand valorises the experience of the majority of rural Timorese, a focus found in GCRET documents in 1975.

Within disciplines, *topic* and *content choices* either reflect Timorese-specific experiences or understand the world through local contexts. Subjects such as mathematics and science tend to contain content that is universal: adding and subtraction; fractions; scale; senses (Year 2); Pollution (Year 3); Space (Year 6). However, the manner in which the content is presented reflects Timorese situations and experiences. Students count using locally-found peanuts, baskets and fish; understand cardinal points through mapping the local community (Year 3);

understand land characteristics and use through surveying the school grounds (Year 1). Such choice provide relevant adaptations for children's learning.

In terms of Timorese-specific experiences, both national and local, contemporary and historical choices form the basis for learning across many subjects. Health includes topics that affect Timorese communities: avoiding and treating diarrhoea (Year 4); avoiding and treating mosquito-carried disease (Year 1); discrimination around AIDS and HIV (Year 6) and throughout the year levels, community health concerns such as keeping communities and schools clean and using water carefully. The social science curriculum has strong links with Timorese history and people, including topics such as colonisation, Indonesian occupation and Timorese resistance (Year 6) as well as patterns of migration and Timorese settlement in pre-historic times (Year 5). The concept of community moves from how the school works (Year 2) to investigating community history and its leaders (Year 4) and taking a wider lens to understand government (Year 4) and Timor-Leste's Asia-Pacific neighbours (Year 5). Rather than the earlier experiences of looking to Portugal for models of citizenship and identity, this curriculum is located in villages, the nation and the regional community.

It is *the teaching materials* that are some of the strongest positive images of community life and representations of Timor-Leste as a nation, cohesive and cooperative. Ostensibly for teaching Tetum and Portuguese across the year, the anthologies of stories, poems and other texts at each level teach students about the lives of themselves and others.

In the Year 3 anthology, *Le'e hagle'an hano'in* [*Stories to tell*] (ME, 2015), all stories are directly within a Timorese setting or adapted (in the case of Aesop tales) to a Timorese village. Stories that reflect community issues present ways of solving problems that are collaborative and peaceful. For example, in the Portuguese language story "Onde está a água? [*Where is the water?*]", Aunty Abela investigates to find out why the community standpipe has run dry, finding that another family have left their pipe running, a common practice in communities despite the country's propensity for drought. Through discussion, a solution is found where taps are turned off when not in use and the water pressure is restored to allow all in the community to access water. The story portrays the Timorese village as the site of problem-solving to identify mutually acceptable solutions to local issues.

Within the same volume, two stories in the Tetum language section valorise the resistance of the *povo* during Indonesian occupation. Set in 1978, "Maria no Rosa nia aventura" [*Maria and Rosa's adventure*] show two cousins who, under the cover of darkness with other villagers, collect water in bamboo tubes and then deliver it to the resistance fighters in the mountains. Such support is understood as the contribution of the local Timorese in the fight for independence: "Lider sira haksolok no agradese sira-nia luta ba ukun rasik-an. [*The leaders were happy and grateful for their [Maria and Rosa] fight toward independence*]" (p. 31). Similarly, in "Karta ba Julio [*A letter for Julio*]", Julio is imprisoned for resistance activities and his younger sister cleverly devises a way to deliver a letter from the resistance leader, Nicolau Lobato, by hiding it in bread. Not only does this valorise the actions of ordinary people, it provides a vehicle for Lobato's famous words "A nossa vitória é apenas questão de tempo [*Our victory is only a question of time*]", immortalised on a memorial in Dili and powerful symbols of the Timorese resilience. Thus, the Year 3 story not only again shows the resourcefulness of the local Timorese people,

the *povo*, but establishes the wisdom of Timorese leaders through their words and the validity of the struggle. Similar stories of courage, struggle and wisdom are found throughout the other anthologies.

The Year 6 anthology, *Um mundo de histórias [A world of stories]* (ME, 2016), presents more stories of a global significance, with texts recounting the deeds of young people and those who support young people globally: Anne Frank, Iqba Masih, Nehu Gupta, Samantha Smith. While the text cover shows children reading books covered in the flags of the lusophone nations, apart from a text about the commonwealth itself, the texts are largely from Timor-Leste or wider international contexts. Local texts again draw on images of Timor's history and myths, including the poem by Xanana Gusmão, "Avô crocodile [*Grandfather crocodile*] valorising the creation legend of Timor-Leste ("diz a lenda e eu acredito! É Timor! [*the legend says and I believe! It is Timor!*]" p. 16) and another by the famous local poet, Francisco Borja da Costa "Um minuto de silêncio [*A minute's silence*]" that remembers the independence fight and nationhood: "Pela pátria, pela nação, pela nossa libertação [*For the country, for the nation, for our liberation*]" (p. 18). Again, students are presented with nation-defining texts along with those situated in school and communities.

Even when the topic is not Timor-specific, the texts work to contextualise locally. For example, the text created to accompany the Year 6 topic on Space, *Haree ba lalehan [Look to the heavens/sky]* (Gabrielson & Langford, 2015) contains generic photos of the moon and planets, but shows Timorese landscape to explain shadow, tides and other phenomena, using recognisably Timorese people and settings. Thus, rather than importing resources available from other countries, materials have been created to reflect how Timorese children might see the world in order to explore these scientific concepts.

In fact, there are few examples of curriculum topics and concepts not contextualised for students in Timor-Leste. One example is found in the Year 3/4 text for introducing Portuguese literacy, *Meu Português [My Portuguese]* (ME, c. 2015). The Portuguese alphabet uses an image of a koala for *k* and the silhouette of a windsurfer for *w*, neither of which would be known to children in many villages and not even Portuguese words. It is difficult to imagine students or teachers making meaning from these images.

However, apart from these few examples, most images in the new classroom materials would be familiar to Timorese children. Children are dressed in contemporary outfits – shorts, T-shirts, flip-flops or barefoot, with formalwear for church – in recognisable settings, such as playing soccer or volleyball, local schools and playgrounds, houses made from local materials, going to church, in order to learn about topics that are applicable to Timorese history and lives. Timorese people are valorised as the victors in their struggle and capable of bringing peace to their lives.

Another opportunity for addressing localised needs in the curriculum is within *the lesson plans* which, while scripted, encourage teachers modify to suit local conditions. One of these conditions is language. In lessons that introduce new vocabulary, particularly when using Portuguese terms, the same is provided in Tetum to build meaning through both languages. For example, in teaching fractional $\frac{1}{2}$, both the Tetum ("balun ida") and the Portuguese ("metade") are given. Bilingual dictionaries have been developed and are encouraged: "Enkoraja sira uza *Disionáriu*

Eskolár Bilinge bainhira sira ladún komprende liafuan nia signifikadu [*Encourage them to use the Bilingual school dictionary when they don't understand the meaning of a word*]” (Year 3, Tetum). Importantly for localised understanding, first languages are also encouraged: “Bele uza lian inan (L1) tulun [students] komprehende [*You can use mother tongue to help [students] understand*]” (Year 1, Tetum).

In other areas, teachers are encouraged to local alternatives and adaptations. For example, in Year 3 Science, the widely-available plant, cassava, is used to understand plant structures, but teachers are advised to look at the plants in that area. In Year 2 Science, students observe the composition of the playground soil to understand the local land so teachers are given background notes to make sense of various soils and how to classify their local variety. In Year 6 Social Science, when looking at Indonesian invasion and occupation, teachers are encouraged to look to the local community experience of this history, “Bainhira fatin istóriku ruma iha área lokál ne'ebé importante no bele asesu, bele halo paseu ba fatin ne'e [*If there is a local place of historical importance and is accessible, you can visit it*]”. These adaptations encourage teachers to use local conditions and experiences as focal points for the curriculum and application of classroom knowledge.

Thus, at all levels of the curriculum, from high level goals to daily teaching, the local experience – of the nation, of the community – has been embedded in this current curriculum. However, unless teachers understand how to enact the curriculum in locally-relevant ways, the goals cannot be realised. The teacher survey provides some indication of how teachers understand local content.

Teachers' understanding of local content in the curriculum

The following data is that taken from the 2019 survey of teachers, focusing on the responses concerning the idea of using the local context in teaching. The responses to questions about the new curriculum indicated that teachers were generally positive about the content, the teaching materials and core strategies and when visiting schools to distribute and collect the surveys, the researchers noted that teaching guides were in evidence and in use in many classrooms.

Of particular interest here is the response to the prompt, *I think “the way of local life” is important for Timor-Leste* and the comments teachers made. Overall, teachers responded positively to the prompt, with 68 “Agree” and 2 “Disagree” (16 with no response). This result indicates strong general support for local content.

However, when teachers were then prompted to explain the meaning of “way of local life”, there were only 22 responses, one of the lowest responses across the survey. This suggests difficulty with defining this particular idea. Of those who responded, some responses concerned general learning, for example

tuir ha'u nia hanoin maneira moris lokal ha'u uza atu hanorin alunos sira bele komprende [*according to me, the way of local life, I use to teach students so that can understand*] [Year 4 teacher, rural].

Eight of the respondents were able to provide explanations that encompassed a broad understanding of the local community of the students, echoing ideas from the curriculum, for example,

professor hanorin bazeia ba kondisaun no situasaun labarik sira nian [*a teacher teaches based on the conditions and situation of the children*] [Year 5 teacher, town]

utiza mos moris lokal no mos materiais didaktikas lokal nia [*utilise the local life and also teaching materials from the community*] [Year 3 teacher, rural]

Three other responses focused only on agriculture and rural life, such as tuir vida agrikultór [*according to agricultural life*] [Year 4 teacher, rural] maneira moris katak moris iha foho ou fatin isolado [*way of life for rural or isolated place*] [Year 4 teacher, town]

Another three responses highlighted using Tetum as using the local conditions, for example

ami nu'udar manorin nain ami sempre uza lian Tetum tuir ne'ebe mak maiora ho lian [*as teachers we always use Tetum which is the common language*] [Year 4 teacher, town outskirts]

Another four responses identified using local materials to teach rather than a wider understanding of the community, for example

ha'u uza ai kesak, fatuk musan atu hanorin liu-liu iha materia matematika [*I use sticks and stones to teach mathematics*] [Year 1, rural]

profesor uza materia lokál, ai-tahan, batar musan no seluk-seluk tan [*the teacher uses local materials, leaves, corn and other things*] [Year 5 teacher, rural]

These attempts to explain the concept of “local life” suggest that while teachers strongly supported the idea that it was an important component of their teaching, they are not clear about what opportunities this might afford beyond acknowledgement of the rural environment and the use of Tetum and local objects.

The other set of questions in the survey that help understand how teachers view local realities in their teaching is found in the responses to why they do their job. Teachers were asked about how they became a teacher and what they found positive and negative about the role, including the question “Tambasa ita bo'ot sai hanesan serbisu ne'e? [*Why do you do this job?*]”. Just over half of the teachers – 46 – responded with reasons including personally identifying with the profession as a vocation (28 responses)

Hakarak idiak ha'u nia an iha vida professor [*I really want for myself the life of the teacher*] [Year 3 teacher, rural]

ha'u nia vokasaun [*it is my vocation*] [Year 5 teacher, town]

The most common reason (29 responses) across all settings positioned teaching as a national endeavour

atu ajuda labarik sira iha Timor-Leste [*to help children in Timor-Leste*] [Year 2 teacher, town]

ha'u hakarak fo contribusaun ba ha'u-nia nasaun ida ne'e hodi dedika- an [*I want to make my contribution to my nation, this is what I dedicate myself*] [Year 5 teacher, outskirts]

hakarak kontinua servisu ne'e hodi bele servi nasaun no povu [*I want to continue this work so I can serve the nation and the ordinary people*] [Year 2 teacher, rural]

These comments were borne out by a later prompt– “Serbisu hanorin importante para nasaun [*Teaching is important to the nation*]” – with all those who responded (80 responses) agreeing, indicating that teachers do view their work within the national endeavour.

Across all responses to do with the profession, what was missing was any mention of how the local community might benefit from or be included in education. Only one teacher linked community development as an outcome of their work:

partisipasaun ba dezentolimentu iha ita nia suku laran tan ne'e ema fo fiar atu halao serbisu [*have more participation in development inside our local village so people have faith to get work*] [Year 6 teacher, rural]

Local communities were not mentioned in any of the open prompts for this or other sections of the survey. The focus of teachers' work was firmly within personal or nation goals (see Quinn & Buchanan, 2021).

Discussion

This paper has outlined how Timor-Leste's educational history has often reflected the interests of various entities, not necessarily of Timorese themselves. While some acknowledgement of localising curriculum is seen in early colonial documents, it was only in the never-implemented 1975 model and the current 2015 curriculum that local Timorese experience is embedded at all levels of teaching and learning. The current curriculum has considered "what education is needed and for what type of society" (Amadio et al., 2015, p. 4) as being that which overtly values the national identity forged by its history and culture along with the day-to-day reality lived within a local community. To support the focus on peaceful and participatory styles of community interaction, the pedagogy is largely participatory and inclusive, a style that may not sit comfortably with teachers' own understandings about teaching and their roles.

While local way of life is at the heart of the curriculum, teachers have tended to be focused on their personal role as a teaching – as a vocation – or that of building a stronger nation. In fact, in Ogden's (2017a) discussions with teachers and principals about the curriculum, Timorese content was not mentioned, instead, school staff were more interested in "catching up" through internationalisation (p. 58). Elmore (2002) contends that "teachers have very strong ideas about what kinds of practices will work for their students, and what won't" (p. 18), thus if teachers see little advantage in localising learning or do not understand how to contextualise within the community experience, this principle – however well-positioned in curriculum documents – may not be enacted as intended.

The findings here echo the close observation of primary school classrooms from 2005 (Quinn, 2011). In that study involving ten lessons/20 hours of classroom activity, only one teacher was observed making connections to the local experience. In summarising the equivalency of fractions a Year 6 mathematics teacher drew the analogy of sharing of bread to his son and daughter, that one would not be given more than the other (also providing an interesting message about gender equality) (p. 217, 406). Later he proposed using multiple strategies to simplify fractions to reach the same answer, likening it to taking different bus routes within the city to reach the same destination (p. 423). Taking the opportunity to use local contexts to make sense of abstract concepts was not common across the observed classes, even for teachers talking about nutrition and Tetum language where the context might seem particularly relevant.

What has not been documented in the current study is the practice of teachers in using the lesson plans and how their day-to-day or contingent practice is oriented

to the local context, particularly in adapting content or materials. Local analogies and adaptations may be being used, as exemplified by the 2005 example. On the other hand, teachers may be resisting what they see as irrelevant, as seen in earlier studies (e.g. Shah & Quinn, 2016). A question to be answered is whether the scripted lesson plans are in fact constraining teachers into thinking that they must follow the directions exactly, and not adapt to local conditions despite the curriculum advice to make relevant to students' needs (ME, 2014). Classroom data would present the opportunity for further understanding of how teachers understand their role in making learning relevant to local life.

To serve teachers – and ultimately, students – clear models for how to link learning to the local context, the way that children and communities live and use new knowledge may be needed. Like the teacher who *did* mention communities, the “development inside our local village” presents a powerful application of education: how can what we learn strengthen our community, and in doing so, our nation? This is a timely challenge for the Education Ministry and those that support teacher development (NGOs, donor programs), to focus in-servicing on using the local realities of teachers and students. Such support can assist in transforming classrooms, from places that might only use sticks or baskets as symbols of the local environment, to sites where what it means to be a Timorese child of a particular community is valued and used to make sense of the world and global aspirations of the nation.

Conclusion

What happens in schools goes beyond merely “education” and into nation-building (Sercombe & Tupas, 2014; Ansell & Lindvall, 2013), with primary school curriculum typically the first opportunity for the state to influence how children will see their world and build understandings of the place of their community, their nation and the world. This planned-for view of the world is “the product of a process of social dialogue and collective construction” (Amadio et al., 2015, p. 6) within the curriculum reform process. In the case of Timor-Leste, it is only into the 21st century that the “collective construction” has been able to focus on the uniquely Timorese history and experiences, as a nation and within the local community realities, valorising the struggle for independence and projecting images of a strong and peaceful nation. The principles and practice written into education documents make such a focus clear.

However, beyond the state influence on curriculum design, schools and teachers make significant classrooms choices as to the way learning will both reflect and serve their own local community. As teachers become more comfortable in using the new curriculum, support to understand more deeply how “the way of local life” might form the basis of education presents the opportunity to transform classrooms into places where children learn about themselves and their local community, and in doing so, the opportunity to transform that community and their own lives.

Notes

1. Officially, the country uses the Portuguese name, *Timor-Leste*, with *Timor Lorosa'e* in Tetum and *East Timor* used in English. Throughout this paper, the official name is used, unless quoting from sources.

2. Figures from the Education Ministry's statistical database provided in April 2019, dated July 2018.
3. The ministry responsible for formal education in Timor-Leste has changed names many times since 2002, for example: Ministry of Education; Ministry of Education, Culture, Youth and Sport; Ministry and Education and Culture. The generic "Education Ministry" is used throughout this paper, with publications cited using the name at that time.

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