

## LEARNING ABOUT TIMOR-LESTE: TRACING THE “TIMORISATION” OF CURRICULUM REFORM

## APRENDENDO SOBRE TIMOR-LESTE: TRAÇANDO A “TIMORIZAÇÃO” DA REFORMA CURRICULAR

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# LEARNING ABOUT TIMOR-LESTE: TRACING THE “TIMORISATION” OF CURRICULUM REFORM<sup>1</sup>

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**Abstract:** The first national planning document of the newly independent Timor-Leste included in its vision that “East Timor will be a democratic country with a vibrant traditional culture” (East Timor Planning Commission, 2002, p. xviii). Education, as an important arm of nation-building, includes a strong link to culture by including the principle of “Ligasaun ba kultura no maneira moris lokál nian [Connection to culture and way of local life]” (Ministério da Educação [ME], 2014, p. 18). However, much of Timor-Leste’s educational history has been characterised by adherence to goals that rarely addressed Timorese needs or identity. Using content analysis, this paper traces the way in which official and educational documents have considered local people and conditions in the past - during the periods of colonisation and occupation - and those of the present, particularly through the current curriculum for primary school. Also considered are teachers’ responses to a recent survey of understanding of “local life”, suggesting that a greater orientation of learning to the local context is needed in the future to understand how education might strengthen Timorese communities and culture.

**Keywords:** curriculum planning; localisation; primary school; Timor-Leste.

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**Resumo:** No Plano de Desenvolvimento Nacional de 2002, Timor-Leste, recém-independente, perspectivava-se como um “país democrático com uma cultura tradicional vibrante” (East Timor Planning Commission, 2002, p. xviii). Sendo a educação um pilar importante na construção da nação, esta requer uma forte ligação à cultura. O currículo do ensino primário apresenta como princípio a “Ligasaun ba kultura no modo moris lokál nian [Ligação à cultura e ao modo de vida local]” (Ministério da Educação [ME], 2014, p. 18). Mas, grande parte da

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história educacional de Timor-Leste caracterizou-se pela adesão a objetivos que raramente abordavam as necessidades ou a identidade timorense. A partir da análise de conteúdo, este artigo traça o modo como os documentos oficiais e educacionais consideravam as populações e as condições locais, no passado - durante os períodos de colonização e ocupação - e atualmente, particularmente através do atual currículo para o ensino primário. As impressões dos professores também foram consideradas, através das suas respostas a uma recente pesquisa sobre a compreensão da “vida local”, sugerindo, no futuro, a necessidade de uma maior orientação da aprendizagem para o contexto local, por forma a entender como a educação pode fortalecer as comunidades e a cultura timorense.

**Palavras-chave:** planeamento curricular; localização; ensino primário; Timor-Leste.

## INTRODUCTION

Education is arguably one of the most valued and contested areas of public life in any country, and together with Health, community consultations has shown it to be a highly valued area for Timorese. Research – and indeed, controversy – has taken place in various educational issues such as educational language policy (e.g. Albuquerque, 2010; Batoreo, 2010; Quinn, 2015; Taylor-Leech, 2009) and curriculum reform (e.g. Shah & Quinn, 2016; Ogden, 2017; Soares, M, 2019; Soares, T, 2019). This paper is concerned with how one particular principle of the current primary school curriculum, “Ligasaun ba kultura no maneira moris lokál nian [Connection to culture and way of local life]” (Ministério da Educação [ME], 2014, p. 18), reflects the present independent Timor-Leste, and works toward the goal articulated in the first development plan, that “East Timor will be a democratic country with a vibrant traditional culture and a sustainable environment” (East Timor Planning Commission, 2002, p. xviii). This present is in contrast to the past understandings of education of Timorese children.

This paper surveys government and curriculum documents produced since 1900 to explore how external influences – colonialism, occupation and globalisation – have shaped what Timorese children will learn through formal education, and the ways in which independence, its promise in 1975 and its realisation in 2002, has shaped the content of curriculum, moving toward a stronger focus on the Timorese realities. By contrast, a recent survey of teachers’

understanding of their work suggests that while teachers identify strongly with education as a nation-building activity, they are less aware of how local adaptation might enhance students’ learning or the community they live in. Teachers sit at the forefront of the global desire for “quality education” (see UNESCO, 2015; World Bank, 2018), seen as “filters for any change initiative” (Dembélé & Lefoka, 2007, p. 534), thus their understandings and value for “local life” has a significant impact on how children will understand the ways in which education might strengthen their communities. This study, then, tracks some of the formative ideas of the past and looks at what the future might hold with a greater focus on this principle of the present primary curriculum.

## GLOBALISATION VS LOCALISATION

For small independent states, there is the difficult balance of global goals, such as the current Sustainable Development Goals, with more local and contextualised goals that reflect the struggle for recognition as a nation. In this endeavour, formal education becomes an important aspect of nation-building (Ansell & Lindvall, 2013; Rizvi, 2007; Tickly, 2001), seeking to create in their young people a new national identity, beyond a colonial past, while also developing outward-looking citizens in view of their future and that of the nation. Tickly (2001) suggests that the state and other civil players have a role in “mediating the influence of global forces” (p. 155) in transforming curriculum for a local audience, to focus on the particular aspects of the local culture. Tensions exist where new nations are encouraged to adopt the educational policies and agendas of ex-colonial nations or other “global agendas”, policies such as “learner-centred pedagogy” or “co-operative learning”, without reference to the local understandings of teaching and teachers. Where such “policy borrowing” (Jansen, 2002) exists, it is teachers who interpret centralist policies to serve the local conditions and their understanding of learner needs (Vavrus & Barlett, 2009). Resistance to such policy, for example, has been observed in the Timorese context (Shah & Cardozo, 2016; Shah & Quinn,

2016), where teachers have rejected particular promulgated teaching strategies – e.g group work, student talk practices – in order to maintain what they see as “control” of classroom activity. The challenge in Timor-Leste, as in other settings, has been a local interpretation and implementation that serves the learners and the teachers, that reflects localised understandings of “what education is needed and for what type of society” (Amadio, Operetti and Tedesco, 2015, p. 4). The current curriculum has endeavoured to reflect content and ways of learning more in line with Timorese aspirations.

## RESEARCH APPROACH

Data for this paper was largely derived through content analysis, in this case, documents that have expressed sentiments or directives as to how Timorese will be educated. Such qualitative methodology can “provide knowledge and understanding of the phenomenon under study” (Downe-Wamboldt, 1992, p. 314), in this case, education in Timor-Leste. Analysis involves paying attention to wording and identifying patterns (White & March, 2006), so as to “illuminat[e] the themes and ideologies which give meaning to pieces of writing” (O’Connor, 2019, p. 67). Coding for the analysis was based around identifying instances of wording around “education”, “local” and “Timorese”. Krippendorff (1989, p. 403) suggests that document analysis 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. 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 consider the “past”, the study considers how primary school education in Timor-Leste has been presented since the late colonial period (20th century), with the sample consisting of 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 21 years working in the education sector in Timor-Leste. While historic documents were not extensive – due to availability – these Portuguese governmental records illustrate the changing emphases on education provision in the then-colony. In considering the “present”, of particular attention are the curriculum documents and teaching materials produced by the Ekipa Reforma Kurrikulár Edukasaun Basika [Basic Education Curriculum Reform Team] since these represent the ways curriculum is currently provided to teachers, children and the community.

To further reflect on the “present” understandings that teachers have around including local aspects in teaching the curriculum, data has been included from a survey of teachers undertaken with 18 schools in various locations – within town, outskirts of town and rural – in 2019. The views on a range of teaching issues was collected from 86 teachers across a range of ages and teaching experience teaching across Years 1 – 6 and while this is only a small proportion of the approximately 7500 primary school teachers, it does provide an overview of how teachers understand particular aspects of their work and attitudes to the current curriculum (see Quinn & Buchanan, 2021) for extended discussion of the survey results). Of interest to this paper are their responses to the items regarding their orientation to the current curriculum and questions specifically asking for their understanding of “local life”. This data will be presented as an illustration of the “present”.

While conclusions from this paper are only representative of 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.

## COLONIAL PERIOD: EDUCATION FOR TIMORESE

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 desconhecimento 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).

Of course, it was this interior, or *foho*, where the majority of the population still 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. Local lives are closely bound up with this environment:

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).

Villages are the sites of traditional forms of knowledge, of “usos e costumes” [uses and customs], those objects, beliefs and rituals that form the basis of Timorese culture and knowledge (Silva, 2011). Thus, traditional knowledge rooted in the land directs and shapes people’s lives, making them truly Timorese.

However, schooling during Portuguese colonial times was focussed largely on replicating that in Portugal, the Metrópole, teaching “história de Portugal, princípios de geografia e coragratia portuguesa, alguns conhecimentos sobre as possessões portuguesas [history of Portugal, principles of geography and Portuguese heritage, some knowledge about Portuguese possessions]” (Governo da Colónia de Timor [GovCT], 1916, p. 147), a process that Santos, Meneses and Nunes (2006) identify as being “a implantação de impérios traduziu-se, no mundo das colónias [the implantation of empires translated, into the world of the colonies] (p. 20). Thus, while policy suggested 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]” (GovCT, 1916, p. 147) – the curriculum sat outside the reality of the local people and, in practice, was reserved for

Portuguese nationals and some Timorese elite. Indeed, education was designed to reinforce the Timorese “possession” of Portugal rather than to serve the needs of the local population.

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

sobretudo nas escolas do interior, modificar êste programa de modo a torná-lo mais fácil, práctico 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: “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). Thus, the use of Tetum could provide access to the curriculum, yet education was Portuguese-looking, providing a link to the West and the opportunity to experience Lusophone culture and literature (Wu, 2000). Such content offered to Timorese was critiqued in 1975: “obrigava as crianças da 4<sup>a</sup> classe a aprender os rios, as montanhas, as cidades e as linhas férreas de Portugal, da Guiné, de Angola, de Moçambique, da “Índia Portuguesa” á de Macau, enquanto e geografia de Timor se dicavam apenas meia dúzia de linhas! [4<sup>th</sup> 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), this emphasis on Portuguese culture was potentially widespread across the population, indicating a strong orientation toward a European model of education in this period.



## THE PROMISE OF INDEPENDENCE: “TIMORISATION” OF A NEW CURRICULUM

A significant shift toward local needs emerged in the final years 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 de 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).

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 curriculum outline included an emphasis on Timorese arts and culture with a strong focus on agriculture and village life, since this is where so many of the people lived and worked. Vocational education was planned to train those who lived in villages to better respond to local needs. While the envisaged changes to education were not universally accepted in 1975, notably with opposition from the Catholic Church (Magalhães, 2016), such work brought to consciousness what a Timorese education system might look like. However, despite the work to strengthen and implement this transformation, a political coup in August 1975 and the arrival of Indonesians in December 1975 meant that this curriculum was not realised at this time.

## IMPLEMENTATION OF INDONESIAN EDUCATION IN TIMOR TIMUR

In becoming Timor Timur, the 27th province of Indonesia in 1975, Timorese schools became organs of the Indonesian state and fell under the aus-

pices of Pancasila, the “five principles” as a unifying philosophy for Indonesian independence (Fatlolon, 2016) on which to build the Indonesian nation. Education became an important vehicle to develop good Indonesian citizens (Arenas, 1998). Considering the wide reach of the Indonesian archipelago, the Indonesian curriculum generally allowed for 20% “local content” (Arenas, 1998; Pederson & Arneberg, 1999), including that of Timor-Leste. However, the reality was the “use of schools for propaganda and indoctrination” (CAVR, 2005, p. 48) rather than attention to local needs.

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 those engaged in administrative and professional positions were typically non-Timorese (Jones, 2001, p. 257). Thus, schooling did not address the local needs of much of the Timorese population, or prepare them for a life that reflected their reality.

Over the 24 years of occupation, Indonesia was successful in implementing global goals of universal education, ensuring that most children attended school (Nicolai, 2004), yet achievement levels 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.

## EDUCATION FOR AN INDEPENDENT TIMOR-LESTE

Education was a leading concern in the run-up to the 1999 referendum. The conference convened by the Conselho Nacional de Resistência Timorese [CNRT: National Council for Timorese Resistance] in Melbourne earlier that year identified the sector as a key lever in establishing a Timorese state (CNRT, 1999). The national goals articulated in the first national plan conflated education with broader social goals of the nation:

Our vision is that by 2020, the East Timorese people will be well educated, healthy, highly productive, democratic, self-reliant, espousing the values of nationalism, non-discrimination and equity within a global context (ETPC, 2002, p. 143)

However, in the rush to resume schooling in the wake of Indonesia's withdrawal and subsequent destruction of schools and materials (World Bank, 1999), external interests heavily influenced the development of Timorese education. In their analysis of early educational activity, Millo & Barnett (2004) note that early decisions lacked broad-based consultation and consensus about what constituted Timorese education and further opportunities for consultation were lost through the intervention 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). Despite this, the authors went on to suggest that there was the opportunity to develop a locally-focused curriculum through strong consultation and coordination:

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)

Early attempts to localise teaching resources during this time of emergency and transition to a local system included hastily reprinting Indonesian textbooks with a Timorese flavour: photos of Timorese children were inserted, along with a preface by the resistance hero, Xanana Gusmão (Nicolai, 2004, p. 110). In response to the designation of Portuguese as an official language, textbooks were brought from Portugal and distributed, but with little consideration for the vastly different Timorese context.

The first post-independence curriculum for primary school was written in 2004 and distributed throughout the country between 2005 and 2007. Planning documents tried to move toward the global agenda of democratic child-centredness as well as being "locally-based" (MECJD, 2004, p. 24). Teacher materials included the advice that learning needed to 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 response to more contextualised education, Tetum language teaching materials for Years 1 and 2 were developed in Timor-Leste under the auspices of the Dili-based Mary MacKillop Institute for East Timor Studies [MMI] and, later, the Education Ministry, using stories of Timorese children and animals in local situations. For example, the book *I go walking and what do I see?* (Ward & Franca, 2005) produced in English and Tetum [*Ha'u la'o halimar, sá ida mak ha'u haree?*] includes local sights, such as bananas and pumpkins for sale. MMI had already produced books pre-independence using Tetum, such as, the book *Sa ida make ema homan* [*What do people weave?*] (Ward & Keogh, 1998) that presents local people weaving items such as baskets, hats and mats. As Tetum existed largely as an oral language, these early and subsequent readers provided examples of how Tetum looked, to foster literacy in this co-official language.

Portuguese language books from this period, on the other hand, tend to convey images of Timor still tightly 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 “contribuí 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]”. 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) – focuses solely on the countries that make up the Lusophone community (Angola, Brazil etc). Within this text, conversations are shown in local situations of the village or between family members, yet appear in Portuguese, not accounting for the multilingual reality of Timorese communities or that the use of Portuguese is generally retained for more formal or official domains (see Taylor-Leech, 2009). These images present some confusions in representing a truly Timorese reality.

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), noting that it was largely written in Portugal, with little public consultation or consideration of local needs, and used materials donated by Portugal with little reference to the realities of Timorese students (p. 36). Ogden (2017) notes in her later study of curriculum reform that teachers often mentioned this first 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 contextual obstacles to learning new concepts.

Thus, in the years after independence, there was still a gap in providing a strongly Timorese curriculum for children.

## THE PRESENT CURRICULUM FOR PRIMARY SCHOOLS

The National Education Strategic Plan 2011 – 2030 (ME, 2011) was able to identify a number of gains in education since independence, including the reconstruction of schools, the increase of enrolments across basic education (Years 1 - 9) to almost 90% enrolments and the doubling of the number of primary school teachers (pp. 20-21). The nation, however, still faced a number of obstacles in terms of increasing academic achievement for children, including workforce skill:

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)

Data from the Educational Management System for 2017 show that high drop-out rates continue in the early years – up to 4.6% - and repetition at Year 1 was 24% indicating stagnation in learning. In addition, the Early Grade Reading Assessment (World Bank, 2019) had shown poor literacy and numeracy skills for young children.

Thus, to enact the government’s vision that “all students ...are taught by well-trained and qualified teachers, so they receive a quality education”

(ME, 2011, p. 134), reform of the curriculum needed to address not only the content being delivered, but the reality of teachers, classrooms and students in the Timorese context.

Reform of the primary school curriculum was 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 identified by the Ministério da Educação and other commentators (such as Shah, 2012), to design a “Timorese curriculum”. In order to foreground local realities, the majority of the multinational, multilingual design team consisted of Timorese advisors and teachers, widespread consultation with civil and education groups garnered views and input into each discipline: the curriculum foreword notes more than 110 groups or individuals consulted in the project (ME, 2014, pp. 7-9). Indeed, this process resembled the consultation undertaken in the 1975 curriculum reform by the GCRET (Magalhães, 2016).

Local content in terms of Timorese history, geography, politics and cultural diversity is foregrounded in the curriculum documents, with the emphasis on how knowledge might be applied to everyday life:

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).

In terms of the *syllabus structure*, 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 – with initial literacy in Tetum, reflecting its wider community use (DGE,

2015). A particularly Timorese addition to the art and culture subject is the strand of permaculture, with 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, echo-ing GCRET documents in 1975.

In terms of *topic and content*, inclusions both reflect Timorese-specific experiences and understand the world through local contexts. Timorese-specific content reflects both national and local, contemporary and historical topics. For example, Health includes issues that affect Timorese communities: treating diarrhoea (Year 4) and avoiding and treating mosquito-carried disease (Year 1). History looks at Portuguese colonisation, Indonesian occupation and Timorese resistance (Year 6) and Timorese settlement in pre-historic times (Year 5). Community and citizenship topics include how the school works (Year 2), understanding government (Year 4) and Timor-Leste's Asia-Pacific neighbours (Year 5). Thus, this present curriculum is situated within villages, the nation and the regional community.

Subjects such as mathematics and science tend to contain content that is universal, for example, adding and subtraction, fractions, scale, senses (Year 2), pollution (Year 3), and space (Year 6). However, the content is presented within Timorese situations and experiences. For example, counting uses locally-found peanuts, baskets and fish; cardinal points are taught by mapping the local community (Year 3); surveying the school grounds helps understanding land characteristics and use (Year 1).

Within the new *teaching materials*, strong, positive images of community life and representations of Timor-Leste as a nation, cohesive and cooperative are used. Anthologies of stories, poems and other texts at each level designed to teach language – Tetum and Portuguese – also teach students about their own lives and those of others. For example, the Year 3 anthology, *Le'e hake'an hanoin* [*Stories to tell*] (ME, 2015) contains stories set within a Timorese setting or adapted (in the case of Aesop tales) to a Timorese village. Such stories include:

- the Portuguese language story “Onde está a água? [Where is the water?]” where Aunty Abela investigates the reason for the community standpipe

running dry, resulting in teaching the community how to conserve water by turning off taps, and portraying the Timorese village as the site of problem-solving to identify mutually acceptable solutions to local issues.

- set in 1978, “Maria no Rosa nia aventura” [Maria and Rosa’s adventure]” show two cousins who deliver water to the resistance fighters in the mountains, valorising the contribution of local people, “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).

- a letter smuggled into a prison in the story “Karta ba Julio [A letter for Julio]” provides a context to use the words of the resistance leader, Nicolau Lobato, “A nossa vitória é apenas questão de tempo [Our victory is only a question of time]”, powerful symbols of the Timorese resilience and immortalised on a Dili memorial.

The Year 6 anthology *Um mundo de histórias* [A world of stories] (ME, 2016) contains the poems of Timorese writers, including the famous local poet, Francisco Borja da Costa “Um minuto de silêncio [A minute’s silence]” that remembers the independence fight and nationhood, and Xanana Gusmão, “Avô crocodile [Grandfather crocodile] describing the creation legend of Timor-Leste. Such stories valorise the actions and words of Timorese figures.

In disciplines that are less Timor-specific, the new materials provide a local context for new concepts. For example, the Year 6 text, *Haree ba lalehan* [Look to the heavens/sky] (Gabrielson & Langford, 2015) presents phenomena such as tides and shadows using Timorese landscape, ensuring local contextualisation.

One of the few examples of non-contextualised materials are those produced for teaching Portuguese. The Year 3/4 text for introducing Portuguese literacy, *Meu Português* [My Portuguese] (ME, c. 2015) where the Portuguese alphabet uses an image of a koala for *k* and the silhouette of a windsurfer for *w*, neither of which are Portuguese words or would be known to children in many settings. Yet, these examples are rare: most images in the materials would be familiar to Timorese children, with children dressed in contemporary outfits – shorts, T-shirts, flip-flops or barefoot – in recognisable settings, such as playing soccer or volleyball, local schools and playgrounds, houses made from



local materials or going to church. These images build connections between the content and the students in classrooms.

Perhaps the most contentious area of the new curriculum is not so much the curriculum as much as the support to implement the content, the *lesson plans*, provided for each lesson in each discipline. While scripting lessons in countries where teachers are highly trained with four or more years' university study would seem an anathema, in contexts where teachers have little training or weak background knowledge, they can provide high support to guide teachers into new ways of teaching (Schneider & Krajcik, 2002). In this case, to meet the Education Ministry's identified weakness in teacher knowledge and skill (ME, 2011, p. 134), scripted lesson plans are used as a means of developing teachers' content and pedagogical knowledge, and to include interactive and child-friendly strategies that have been espoused for many years (e.g. UNICEF'S Child Friendly Schools), but are not in evidence (see Shah, 2012; Shah & Quinn, 2016).

One criticism of the lesson plans was captured by the words of Filomena Lay, Vice-President of the Ministry's teacher training section at an education congress in 2017 (ME, 2017), couched in terms of restricting the ability to adapt the lessons to the local needs of students:

Os planos de aula limitam a autonomia pedagógica dos docentes... não permitem a devida adequação dos conteúdos à realidade local dos estudantes [the lesson plans limit the pedagogical autonomy of teachers...[they] do not allow the appropriate adaptation of the contents to the local reality of the students] (p. 192)

These comments do not account for the way teachers are advised within the lesson plans themselves to make local adaptations within the lessons. For example, in Year 3 Science, the widely-available plant, cassava, is used to understand plant structures, but teachers are advised to use 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.

Of course, one the most practical ways to adapt to Timorese conditions is the use of language, namely, using both official languages and other languages students might have in the local area. In Year 1, for example, first languages are also encouraged: “Bele uza lian inan (L1) tulun [students] komprende [You can use mother tongue to help [students] understand]” (Year 1, Tetum). At the higher grades, all notes and teaching prompts are provided in both languages, for example in Year 6 Science, Lesson 31 begins with the prompts for the teacher in two languages:

“Hoje vamos começar uma unidade nova, sobre o ar, na a disciplina de Ciências Naturais.”

“Ohin ita sei hahú unidade foun iha dixiplina Siénsia Naturál, kona-ba ár”.

[Today we will start a new unit in Science, about air]

Thus, students – and teachers – have the means to access the content and the strategies.

The changes made to the curriculum content, pedagogy and policy were established by Decree Law 4/2015 (RDTL, 2015), enshrining the new curriculum in law and represents what is presently expected of Timorese primary education.

## UNDERSTANDING THE LOCAL CONTEXT: THE RESPONSE OF TEACHERS.

While the local experience – of the nation, of the community – has been embedded in this current curriculum, unless teachers understand how to enact the curriculum in locally-relevant ways, the goals cannot be truly realised. The survey taken in 2019 suggests that teachers value the idea of local application, with the response to the prompt *I think “the way of local life” is*

*important for Timor-Leste* drawing a strong positive response. The majority – 68 of the 86 teachers – indicated “Agree”, with only 2 indicating “Disagree”. The 16 non-responses present questions about understanding the principle or ambivalence to the idea.

However, further responses indicated that teachers are not yet clear on what local adaptations might be or its application to local communities. 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. Such a result suggests difficulty with defining what “local” might mean or how it is manifested in the curriculum.

Of those who responded, 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]

Four responses narrowed the focus to the use of materials from the local environment rather than a wider understanding of the community, for example

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

Three other responses conflated local life with rural life and, therefore, agriculture, 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 a reflection of 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]

Other answers reflected general understandings of teaching and learning, not a local aspect, for example,

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

These attempts to explain the concept of “local life” suggest that while teachers strongly supported the idea and that it was an important component of their teaching, they had limited understanding of the opportunities this might afford beyond acknowledgement of the rural environment and the use of Tetum and local objects.

The other set of questions that reflect how teachers locate their work were those that asked teachers about why they did their job. As had been observed in an earlier study of teachers (Quinn, 2005), the motivations for teaching are often personal (28 responses), particularly in terms of a vocation, such as,

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]

Others identify national goals for teaching (29 responses), such as,

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 to] [Year 5 teacher, outskirts]

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.

## CONTINUING A FOCUS ON THE LOCAL

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, considering "what education is needed and for what type of society" (Amadio et al., 2015, p. 4).

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 present curriculum overtly values the national identity forged by its history and culture along with the day-to-day reality lived within a local community.

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.

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 (2017) 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). As teachers become more experienced 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.

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. In considering the one teacher who mentioned communities, the “development inside our local village” presents a powerful application of learning: 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 (e.g. 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 aspirations of the nation.

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