

Timor-Leste ten years on: Reconstructing curriculum for the future?

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Since 2003, the transformation of Timor-Leste's (East Timor) primary school curriculum has been a critical aspect of reconstructing the state and the nation following centuries of passive and active conflict. However, six years on from the beginning of this process, and ten years on from the national vote for sovereignty, curriculum reform has proven easier said than done, and it is unclear whether the reforms are contributing to, ameliorating, or having no effect on conditions of fragility in the country.

This paper posits that such reform functions within the political, social and economic fabric of Timorese society and all its underlying complexities. Based on a review of available research and policy documentation the paper explores: (1) the unique background to the conflict in Timor-Leste; (2) the shifting curriculum paradigms that have driven change; and (3) the challenging circumstances into which curriculum development and implementation have occurred. This case vividly illustrates the complex and mutually reinforcing relationship between education, conditions of fragility and limited capacity at all levels. At the same time it demonstrates how the construction of symbolic state institutions, like a new curriculum, may not always be symbiotic or complementary to processes of nation building.

Keywords: curriculum reform, post-conflict education, East Timor

INTRODUCTION

In 2002, Timor-Leste (East Timor), emerged out of centuries of Portuguese colonial rule, two decades of brutal occupation by Indonesia, and nearly three years of UN governance to become one of the world's newest nation-states. Soon after achieving independence, the still nascent state, alongside development partners, prioritised a radical reform of the education sector. A critical component within this was to transform the primary curriculum¹ to ensure that the content and pedagogy of what was taught in Timorese classrooms worked to support, rather than hinder, efforts at social and civic reconstruction.

¹ Primary schooling as discussed in this paper, includes the first six years of basic education in the country (Years One to Six). Up to this point, significant reforms of curriculum have only occurred in these grade levels, but the intention in coming years is to implement such reform across all levels of schooling. Curriculum, as discussed in this paper refers to the entire teaching and learning process that occurs in these classrooms, as this is how it has been defined in policy documents within the country (Chadwick 2004; MEYCS 2004).

My intent is to illustrate, the complex and dynamic relationship that exists between processes of educational change, conditions of fragility in society, and weak capacity at all levels, in line with recent scholarly thinking on the subject by Davies (2009). Specifically, I review a range of research and policy documents that have been produced on the trajectory of curriculum reform in Timor-Leste to provide a critical policy analysis of how the case fits the theory².

Conditions of fragility³ within a state are ones that donors and the government aim to ameliorate; yet the very nature of fragility is such, that at any point these efforts can be disrupted in predictable and unpredictable ways. In such environments, education has come to be seen as one of the most critical state institutions to be transformed, to both restore public confidence and (re) construct legitimacy of the state. Yet education is also one of the most complex and politicised sectors to change because of the critical functions it plays in the 21st century knowledge economy. Central to changing this sector is capacity development. But capacity development is about impacting on the culture and habits of individuals and institutions that enter into the arena with possible behaviours that may have contributed to fragility—a task that is often easier said than done (Davies, 2009).

My analysis begins by demonstrating that at the time of the reforms, there was broad consensus of the profound crisis facing the Timorese education system. A new primary school curriculum was seen to be a necessary step to restoring public confidence and participation in an educational system that had come to be seen as irrelevant and outdated in light of the Timorese struggle, by both the state and donors.

The new primary curriculum framework developed in 2004 intended to create a system of teaching and learning that was reflective of a new post-colonial national identity and would restore faith in the state and its institutions (Chadwick 2004; MEYCS, 2004). The implementation plan, however, lacked recognition of how conditions of continued state fragility—in particular the state's dependency on donor assistance and weak internal capacity—impact on processes of reform and change. At the same time, state-sanctioned and supported versions of Timorese identity that have been perpetuated in the new curriculum fail to recognise the perceptions and beliefs of the majority of its citizens. Therefore, rather than legitimising and consolidating a new social and political order, the

² A significant limitation of this approach is that the documents and policies reviewed were those that could be readily attained (i.e. in electronic versions or that were publically accessible) and understood (i.e. English-language vs. Tetum or Portuguese language documents). I was given significant assistance by researchers and international consultants working in Timor-Leste who were able to provide documentation, and more importantly critical insight that would have otherwise been unattainable.

³ In line with evolving thinking on the labelling of nation-states as fragile (see for example Davies 2009, p. 11), I have chosen to consider fragility as a set of conditions, typified by: deficits in governance, an inability to maintain security, an inability to meet essential needs of citizens, polarisation of identities, high aid dependency, a lack of transparency in decision-making; and perhaps most critically, a lack of will and/or capacity on the part of the state. The state, as discussed in this paper refers to the executive, legislative and judiciary arms of the central government.

reforms have been marred by public contestation, school-level confusion, and a visible disconnect between rhetoric and reality in the ensuing implementation process.

A HISTORICAL CONTEXT FOR REFORM

Conflict, in Timor-Leste, has been the construct of a long history of colonisation and ideological oppression, rather than continuous armed warfare. The education system, as it was structured during both Portuguese and Indonesian rule played a critical role in such control—promoting what Davies (2004) might label “negative conflict”. Colonial powers have long utilised education as a form of cultural invasion (Poster and Zimmer, 1992). Such colonisation aims to displace the culture, lifestyle and values of the colonised society to maintain rigid social stratification and subordination (Fasheh, 1992). Under colonial education systems, curriculum was often structured to maintain an order of dependency and a culture of elitism (Woolman, 2001). As Ferre D’Amare (1979, p. 17) notes, “colonial pedagogy is committed conciously or unconsciously, to the manipulation of being.”

Throughout Portuguese rule the curriculum instilled ideas that Timorese culture and history were closer in culture and history to Portuguese colonies in Africa than to its Asian neighbours, while neglecting Timorese culture and geography altogether. Children were indoctrinated with Portuguese and Catholic values. Pedagogy focussed on rote learning. The intent of this programme of learning was to educate a small administrative class that could effectively manage the colony in Portugal’s “best interest” (Hill 2002; World Bank, 2004; Millo and Barnett, 2004).

The 24 subsequent years of Indonesian occupation provided mass opportunities to participate in basic education for all Timorese children, but for the very specific purposes of control and assimilation into Indonesian society (Millo and Barnett, 2004). Authors have labelled the curriculum, which was prescribed from Jakarta as “serving the purpose of control” (Nicolai 2004, p. 44) and “amount[ing] to cultural indoctrination and an attempt at genocide.” (Carroll and Kupczyk-Romanczuz (2007, p. 67).

The Timorese did not passively accept this control, and education became a site of active resistance and non-participation (Millo and Barnett, 2004; World Bank, 2004; Carroll and Kupczyk-Romanczuz, 2007). Even before independence was achieved, a new development plan⁴ was drafted by resistance leaders (CNRT, 1999), with the vision that “a new East Timor would aspire to have an education system that enhances the development of our national identity, based on our selective cultural and universal human values.” It called for attention and focus to transforming the teaching-learning process, by introducing critical thinking skills and methods and promoting indigenous forms of learning (Millo, 2002).

⁴ With the onset of violence in 1999, the plan was abandoned.

A MANDATE AND NEED FOR CHANGE

In 2002, two significant events in regards to redefining education's purpose in Timorese society occurred. The first was the approval of the National Development Plan, which identified education as a vital mechanism for developing individual capacities and improving the social fabric of Timorese society. Specifically, the plan visioned that through education a future society could be constructed that was "well educated, healthy, highly productive, democratic, self-reliant, espousing the values of nationalism, non-discrimination and equity within a global context." (Nicolai 2004, p. 177). Soon after, the country's Constitution was ratified. Education was defined as a right and obliged the state to create a public education system that was universal, mandatory, and as much as possible free (Art. 59). Together these documents solidified education's role in civic and social reconstruction.

In 2003, at the first National Education Congress, the delegates gathered recognised that, "there is a conception of education, teacher and school that is different from the one we now seek...this means we need to change" (MECYS 2007, p. 4). This followed a series of reports criticising the transitional curriculum being utilised in Timorese primary classrooms at the time, which had only been slightly adapted from the Indonesian curriculum used before independence (World Bank, 1999; Nicolai 2004)⁵. It was suggested in these reports that a significant number of students continued to be withdrawn from school because of family perceptions that what was taught lacked relevance or credibility in light of the country's long struggle for independence. The first National Education Policy which developed out of this period of consultation and review, mandated the immediate need for the state to alter the curriculum that was in place.

THE NEW PRIMARY CURRICULUM

Beginning in 2003, with significant donor assistance, the Ministry of Education, Culture, Youth and Sports (MECYS) began the task of designing a new curriculum for the country's primary schools. Several principles were to be reflected in policy, strategy and pedagogical decisions made throughout the curriculum development, implementation and evaluation process, including the need for the reforms to be:

- **Democratic**, defined as meeting the needs of most students, while adjusted to meet the needs of those still unserved;
- **Flexible and locally-based**, allowing adaptability to local needs and contexts; and
- **Inclusive**, demonstrated by an explicit recognition of gender, ability, cultural, language or geographic barriers embedded in processes of learning and teaching;

⁵ After the Timorese voted for independence from Indonesia in 1999, nearly 90% of educational facilities and schools were destroyed by the Indonesians in their "scorched earth policy", and a large percentage of the teaching force returned to Indonesia (World Bank, 2004). Donor action following this period prioritised actions which enabled primary and secondary students to return to school quickly, such as rebuilding damaged school facilities, providing temporary curriculum resources that would enable instruction to occur (i.e. School in the Box materials), and quickly recruiting potential teachers (Millo and Barnett, 2004; Nicolai, 2004). During this initial period of emergency response, little attention was paid to the content of what was taught.

The intent was for teachers, teacher educators, parents and students to feel that the content and approach of the new curriculum was culturally and socially relevant to the context of Timor-Leste (MECYS, 2004). An implicit concern of the new curriculum was to lend legitimacy to the new state, signalling its ability to effectively and equitably provide mass education (MEC, 2005). At the same time, the new curriculum was intended to “respond to the characteristics of Timor-Leste” and demonstrate that it “values its historical and cultural identity” (MECYS 2004, p. 3).

Changes in content

Content-wise, the newly developed curriculum framework made a number of major changes to the transitional curriculum in place at the time.

Subject	Time Allocation Grades 1 & 2	Time Allocation Grade 3	Time Allocation Grade 4	Time Allocation Grades 5 & 6
Language Portuguese Tetum	8 3 5	8 4 4	8 5 3	8 6 2
Mathematics	5	5	5	5
Religion (optional)	(1)	(1)	(1)	(1)
Environmental Studies	7	7	7	7
Physical Education, Health & Hygiene	2	2	2	2
Arts & Culture	2	2	2	2
Total number of periods	24 periods of 50 minutes each = 20 hours per week	24 periods of 50 minutes each = 20 hours per week	24 periods of 50 minutes each = 20 hours per week	24 periods of 50 minutes each = 20 hours per week

Table 1: The new subject framework (taken from MECYS 2004, p. 17)

This new curriculum placed strong emphasis on the development of academic fluency in both of the country’s official languages, as specified in the country’s Constitution (Art 13.1). Tetum language development was expected to be emphasised at the lower grades, with a gradual transition to Portuguese over time. Outside of the specific language classes, Portuguese and Tetum were to be jointly utilised in subjects like Mathematics and Environmental Studies (Quinn, 2008).

The teaching of religion, which had been a required subject under the transitional curriculum, was made optional⁶. This was reflective of a secularist orientation to religion within the state which had been prescribed in the National Constitution and actively promoted by the government since independence (Berlie, 2007).

Environmental studies, labelled as *Estudu do Meio*⁷, was an entirely new subject. The subject integrated social science, science, geography, history, civics and environmental studies into a thematic study. The emphasis, at the primary level was to develop understandings of Timor-Leste as a nation and as a country (Heyward, 2005). The expectation was that students would begin with a study of their local geography and

⁶ The Ministry indicated that the decision to teach religion at individual schools would need to be made by the parents together with the school, under the proviso that what was taught would respect the freedom of belief and religion of all students at the school.

⁷ Literally translated from Portuguese to English it means “studies of myself”

history and progress to the national context as they moved up in grade level (MECYS 2004, p. 27). Likewise, the content and focus of the arts and culture syllabus shifted to building students' knowledge and appreciation of their own local and national artistic and cultural heritage.

Pedagogy

A major shift of the new curriculum framework was from a skill oriented to an outcomes-based learning approach. Teacher guides developed for each subject outlined the content to be taught, the learning competencies to be developed, learning objectives, instructional methods to be employed, and detailed suggestions of methodology for teaching. The intent of these guides was to allow for local flexibility and autonomy regarding how content is taught, while simultaneously ensuring that teachers had a clear road-map of how to proceed in order to pursue learning objectives embedded in each curriculum topic (Romiszowski 2005, p. 54). Throughout all subject areas, "new basics" such as metacognitive learning techniques, communication skills, critical thinking, and problem solving were to be embedded (Chadwick 2004, p. 16).

Gradual implementation

At the time the framework was developed, the expectation was that the curriculum would be phased in gradually over five years⁸. Implementation was to begin with Grades One and Two in 2005, with full implementation completed by the 2009-2010 school year (MECYS, 2004). Teacher training and implementation at each grade level was to occur through a cascade model of professional development. A core group of teachers and principals would be trained to disseminate the curriculum in their clusters to other schools (MECYS 2004; Romiszowski 2005).

FIVE YEARS ON...

Now in the fifth year of implementation, there is growing concern that the reforms have become quagmired in a mess that is partly its own doing. A large proportion of families are still enrolling their children in school late, or withdrawing them early because of community perceptions that what is taught is still irrelevant or incongruous with their own beliefs and values (Davidson 2005; Carroll and Kupczyk-Romancuz 2007; MEYCS 2007). Likewise, recent national testing data indicates that the majority of Timorese primary children are not achieving to expected year level standards in Tetum, Portuguese and Mathematics, despite renewed focus and emphasis on these subjects within the curriculum framework (Vine 2007; Quinn 2009). Teachers are yet to demonstrate visible changes to their practice, and continue to feel completely unsupported (Quinn 2008, Quinn 2009, Development Partners Meeting 2009).

An exploration of how continued conditions of fragility, weak capacity at all levels, and a lack of citizen ownership of the process of reform, may indicate why changes to practices of teaching and learning have not been as seamless as once presumed.

⁸ This intended schedule of implementation changed as a result of subsequent debate, discussed in the next section.

Limited capacity at all levels

As early as 2005, it was recognised by the government and its development partners that the success of such reforms was in jeopardy because of a lack of appropriate institutional capacity, as well as low teacher capacity. A report from the Ministry (MEC 2005, p. 12) expressed concern that while curriculum development had been well supported by donors it was, “still uncertain how the process of embedding the new curriculum in the system and ensuring that it is adequately supported in the classroom will be financed or managed.” At the time, no process was in place to provide books or materials, aligned with the new curriculum, to schools.

Because of the lack of appropriate resources, teachers have been reported to continue to rely on texts donated by Portugal which lack relevance to the East Timorese context (Heyward, 2005). Many of these texts are reported to be improperly sequenced and too difficult for teachers to effectively utilise with their students (Davidson, 2005). In subjects like Environmental Studies or Arts and Culture where Portuguese-equivalent texts are not available, teachers rely almost exclusively on *Laefek* magazine⁹, published only five times a year (Quinn, 2008).

For many teachers the new curriculum guides continue to be the only teaching resource they have access to, and their only source of knowledge on content which is still largely unfamiliar to them¹⁰. As a result, a technique which continues to be observed in many classrooms is teachers copying elements of their curriculum notes onto a blackboard, with students following suit (Heyward, 2005; Quinn, 2006; Quinn, 2008). This is clearly not in line with the student-centred, responsive, and differentiated learning processes which the curriculum framework espouses.

The reasons for this are many. For one, a significant proportion of the teaching force have entered the vocation without any pre-vocational training in pedagogy or content areas included in the curriculum (World Bank, 2004; Development Partners Meeting, 2009). The training they have received is often short in duration and focusses on minimally preparing them to “manage” a classroom (Davidson, 2005; Romiszowski, 2005; MEC 2005). As a result, many continue to teach in ways that are familiar to them—didactic, teacher-focussed, and non-participative (Heyward 2005; Quinn, 2008).

Additionally, the officially sanctioned languages of instruction have shifted to ones which almost all teachers are unfamiliar with. At the time that Portuguese was reinstated as a national language, fewer than 6% of teachers reported fluency in the language (World Bank 2004, p. 47). In spite of language training which has been funded by Portugal for

⁹ *Lafaek* is a magazine originally created in 2000 by CARE International to promote child rights in Timor-Leste. Since then it has grown through support from the New Zealand and Irish governments to become a series of magazines, specific to grade level groupings. Over time the focus of the magazine has shifted to developing basic literacy, numeracy and knowledge of Timor-Leste history, culture and government (Heyward, 2005).

¹⁰ This paucity of appropriate materials led international advisors, in late 2006, to recommend to the MEYCS that curriculum guides be distributed to all remaining grade levels (Grades Three through Six) with an intensive two day programme of support immediately, rather than wait another four years for the curriculum to be fully phased in (Quinn, personal communication).

several years, this number has not risen significantly¹¹. Tetum, while spoken by the majority of teachers, is unfamiliar to most of them in written form. Teaching children how to read and write effectively in either language continues to be a struggle for many primary educators (Quinn, 2008).

Lacking for these teachers are ongoing forms of support which could assist them in critically assessing their pedagogy and building confidence in teaching new content. Despite recognition early on that teacher professional development was a critical component of successful implementation (see for example MECYS 2004; Romiszowski 2005; MECYS 2005), the Ministry's own lack of internal capacity has continued to impede its ability to provide such support. The quantity and capacity of national and district-level officers tasked with supporting the work of teachers was deemed as "critically deficient" at the time of implementation (MEYCS 2004, p.14). They lacked clarity on their duties and were often unqualified to do their jobs (MECYS 2004, p. 14). Despite a recognition that upskilling and increasing the numbers of these individuals was critical, three years later the government continued to lament that "deficiency and insufficiency of monitoring and supervision mechanisms, devices and structures...for educational management, planning and supervision functions," was an ongoing concern impeding curriculum implementation efforts (MEYCS 2007, p. 7).

A lack of teacher capability, alongside limited government capacity to implement, sustain and evaluate its reform efforts is mutually reinforcing and undermines attempts at providing high-quality education mitigating against fragility. Equally (if not more important) than changing *what* is taught in post-conflict reconstruction, is the need to change *how* this content is taught and *how* new practices and underlying philosophies are supported by internal actors (Davies, 2004; UNESCO 2006; Winthrop and Kirk 2008; Miller-Grandvaux, 2009; UNESCO 2009; Davies 2009). Paulson (2008, p. 515) cautions that if reforms of teaching and learning are not well supported by state actors and institutions, classrooms will not be reflective of peaceful and democratic practices, and learners (and broader society) will come to see the hypocrisy of educational change—ultimately undermining the legitimacy of such a project.

Strong donor influence

In essence, reform is taking place in an environment where although government will is high, capacity to carry out and support such reform is still low. Under these conditions, the role of donors is often highly influential in supporting and influencing change.

In 2006, net aid (both bilateral and multilateral) disbursements to Timor-Leste amounted to 59.7% of real GDP¹² (UNCTAD Secretariat, 2008). In the education sector alone, actual and expected donor assistance in the years from 2003-2008 amounted to just under

¹¹ According to comments made by the Minister of Education, at the 2009 Development Partners Meeting in Dili, 80% of teachers continue to struggle to master Portuguese as a language, and out of a recent cohort of 3000 teachers who went through training, only 10% of them graduated to the levels now required for primary school teachers.

¹² Amongst the least industrialised countries, this percentage is second highest only to Tuvalu.

\$58 million USD as Table 2 indicates¹³. As a percentage of the actual and expected budget of the MEYCS over the same period, aid assistance accounted for nearly 64% of all expenditure in the sector¹⁴.

Case study research from other conflict affected, fragile states has shown that a nation's reliance on the "altruism" of development partners can lead to the acceptance of controversial changes to curriculum policy, or the employment of a technical stance to social and political "problems" embedded within contentious reform efforts (Tawil and Harley 2004; Vongalis-Macrow 2006; Murray 2008).

In Timor-Leste, many have blamed donor influence for the "self-effacing" government position on the utilisation and development of Tetum in Timorese classrooms (Taylor-Leech, 2008). Millo and Barnett (2004) suggest that the government's decision to reintroduce Portuguese into schools was partly motivated by early promises made by Portugal to fund the expensive undertaking of training teachers and providing a set of new curriculum resources¹⁵. As can be seen in Table 2, Portugal and Brazil are important donors within the education sector, with the bulk of their investment funding the reintroduction of Portuguese into schools.

Donor	Objectives	Amount (USD\$)
UNICEF	Teacher training, capacity building at school, district and national levels, primary curriculum implementation support	10,304,000
New Zealand	Capacity building, funding of <i>Lafaek</i> magazine	605,500
Portugal	Language support for existing teachers in Portuguese	15,430,000
Brazil	Language support for existing teachers in Portuguese	492,400
World Food Programme	Provide free snacks in primary schools	3,291,408
Ireland	Funding for <i>Lafaek</i> magazine	259,673
World Bank	School infrastructure improvement, acquisition of Portuguese language materials, funding for <i>Lafaek</i> magazine, policy development support	27,535,000
TOTAL		57,917,981

Table 2: Contributions of development partners to primary education (MEC 2005, p. 32)

Meanwhile, the majority of funding for Tetum language materials has come from NGOs with significantly smaller wallets (the notable exception being New Zealand and Ireland's funding of *Lafaek* magazine).

¹³ This amount is probably an underestimation of the total amount of donor assistance, as the figures presented come from a 2005 report. Some donors were in the process of renewing their aid amounts at that time. By all indications, aid inflows have increased since 2005.

¹⁴ This figure is calculated from aggregating actual and expected Ministry of Education budgets from 2003-2008 amounting to a total of \$91,061,837 USD over this period (MEC, 2005).

¹⁵ It should be noted that the adoption of Portuguese as an official languages, was precipitated by other factors as well, such as: Portuguese being a language of resistance during the time of occupation; strong support for the resistance from *Lusofone* (Portuguese speaking) communities during the Indonesian occupation; and the strong association between the Catholic Church and Portuguese language (Taylor-Leech, 2007).

Disproportionate donor investment in Portuguese as a language of instruction has severely compromised the multilingual foundations upon which the nation and its schools were to be based. Beginning in 2004, a series of directives from the MEYCS indicated to schools that they should prioritise the implementation of Portuguese over Tetum, owing to the latter's "tentative status" as an academic language (Taylor-Leech, 2008; Quinn, 2008). At the school level, a paucity of Tetum-language resources has led to teachers utilising Tetum primarily as an oral or explanatory language of instruction, while Portuguese is used almost exclusively when written content is presented (Quinn 2006; 2008). In the long-term, these practices serve to reinforce the second tier status and arrested development of Tetum as an academic language.

As a result, there is widespread sentiment that the government is not supporting Tetum as much as it should be in the schooling sector. This was recently reflected in a statement made by NGOs at the 2009 Development Partners' meeting, who warned that,

We remind the government that education plays a vital role in supporting the development of people's cultural identity, and that it is much easier for children to learn in their first languages. At this crucial stage in the nation's development, it is especially important that the government invest resources in the development and promotion of Tetum as a vibrant official and national language. We encourage the government to commit itself to integration of Timorese culture and languages into the curriculum, to ensure a relevant and culturally-appropriate learning environment for Timorese children.

While it may seem like a seemingly small matter, the prioritisation of Portuguese over Tetum in terms of donor support and subsequent government action has the potential to undermine the state's attempts at nation-building and social reconstruction. Evidence from other fragile states indicates that the choice of official languages in classrooms can be a critical aspect of reinforcing or undermining state legitimacy, as well as mitigating or contributing to public grievances against the government (Tawil and Harley, 2004; Miller-Grandvaux, 2009). For many Timorese, Portuguese is still not perceived of as a language associated with their national identity (Leach 2007; Taylor-Leech, 2008), nor is it seen universally as a useful commodity for participation in the knowledge economy (Kingsbury, 2007). In both Leach's (2007) and Taylor-Leech's (2008) studies¹⁶, a small, but discernable segment of the Timorese population hold overtly negative attitudes towards Portuguese, believing it to be a form of cultural imposition or neo-colonialism. Conversely, these same studies found that Tetum was perceived to be of critical utility in day-to-day existence, and an important source of identity formation.

¹⁶ In Leach's quantitative study, 20% of the tertiary students he surveyed held onto what he classified as "overtly negative" views of the designation of Portuguese as official language. Similarly, in Taylor-Leech's qualitative study, Timorese studying abroad were those most likely to hold onto overtly negative perceptions of Portuguese (59% of responses), but throughout all groups there was a sentiment that the language was elitist, exclusive and imposed in its origins.

There is increasing concern that transparency of decision-making and processes of inclusiveness and broad consultation are being subsumed to new forms of colonialism by donors (Caroll and Kupczyk-Romanczuk 2007, p. 79). Quinn (2006) believes that “principles of the new curriculum [include] ones that reflect the views of those consultants who helped write [it],” rather than that of the state or other national actors. Heyward (2005, p. 33) raises a similar concern, noting that, “given the extensive donor support being provided...there is a real sense in which the ownership of programs rest not primarily with the government and local agencies but with the international and foreign agencies and their personnel.” The danger is that over time, the very intent of the reforms is undermined by the influence of donors, as public disengagement and/or contestation increase.

The difference between state building and nation building

The curriculum framework discusses the importance of content and pedagogy being reflective of Timorese values and identity. In Timor-Leste there is growing concern over whether national narratives which are promulgated in the new curriculum are truly representative of contemporary Timorese identity, or whether they are based on assumed notions of what other liberal, democratic, “modern” societies aspire to (Leach, 2007).

Sceptics point to the controversial decision to make religious education (specifically Catholic education) an optional subject, as evidence of how the new curriculum is incongruous with contemporary Timorese society. The policy decision aimed to symbolise the state’s entry into a liberal, democratic society, as well as represent the progressive and modern attitude of the new state to citizens and donors (Berlie, 2007). However, modern Timorese identity is closely tied to Catholicism, with a high percentage of Timorese viewing the religion as very important to being truly Timorese (Leach, 2007). In light of the role the Catholic establishment served in both supporting the resistance and promoting Tetum as a language, this may not be unsurprising.

A public letter to the government was written in February 2005 by two prominent bishops contending this implied divorce of Catholicism from Timorese identity. In their letter the bishops argued that the state gains its power from the people, and that in the case of society in Timor-Leste, religion, and in particular Catholicism forms an important aspect of the heritage and legacy of the country, in a similar fashion to Portuguese language (Ricardo and Nascimento, 2005). They called for religious education to be made a mandatory subject. This plea fell on deaf ears, and in response the church organised a series of demonstrations in Dili. Hundreds of truckloads of protestors flooded into the capital between April and May of 2005, bringing economic activity to a standstill. The ability of the Catholic establishment to mobilise this support indicated that public mandate was not reflected in the decision to make religious education optional, yet the government was not willing to concede on this point. Instead, the Prime Minister at the time, Mali Alkatiri, labelled the demonstration as undemocratic, and undermining peace and stability of the country. He ordered police to block protesters entering into the capital (Berlie 2007, p. 410), an action which made him look even more unfavourable in the eyes of the public.

For new nation-states such as Timor-Leste, the “nation” is often an imagined and still largely undefined political community (Anderson, 1991). The development of a national identity through curriculum reform is often the result of a “violent process of destruction and reconstruction of social relations and structures” (Tawil and Harley 2004, p. 9), with the aim of creating a new monopoly on appropriate knowledge. As Popkewitz and Brennan (1998) note, “curriculum is continually a practice of inclusion/exclusion, of constructing reason and nonreason that have critical moments in the construction of ‘self’ and the world.” Murray (2008, p. 39) concludes that, “what we teach our children is [either the] story of who we are, or [in the case of transformative systems] who we want to be.” For curriculum reform to assist in constructing social cohesion and shared identity, public acceptance and ownership of the new national narrative espoused is vital. Conversely without this acceptance, the reforms are likely to become a public grievance and a source of hostility for citizens against the state (Bush and Sarterelli, 2000).

Recent research suggests that shared ownership, transparency, and community participation are essential principles of educational reform in post-conflict situations if the aim is for schooling to mitigate, rather than exacerbate, existing conditions of fragility (Miller-Grandvaux, 2009). The government’s initial decision and its subsequent response symbolised to many citizens a visible manifestation of a lack of transparency in decision-making, and unwillingness on the part of the state to heed citizen input. More broadly it opened the door for the first time, to an open questioning of the legitimacy of the state by the Catholic church, an institution which many Timorese hold in higher regard than the state (Berlie, 2007; Leach, 2007). Growing disrepute and tension between official policy, national action, and local actors, presents real risks to education’s role in mitigating conditions of fragility.

CONCLUSION

Six years on from the start of the reforms, it is not clear that either quality or social and civic reconstruction have progressed as a result of this project. I would like to suggest that this might be partly attributable to donors and the state failing to explicitly consider the dynamic relationship between education, fragility and capacity in the design and implementation of this new curriculum. At the time the reforms were introduced in 2004, Timor-Leste was perceived of as a success story of post-conflict reconstruction by the international community—an example of how turnaround¹⁷ from conditions of fragility could be achieved with the concerted effort of strong donor assistance (Ballard, 2008). At the time, it was assumed that Timor-Leste had moved quickly out its post-conflict period and was on a sustainable road to recovery.

Yet the underlying conditions of fragility (weak government capacity, a lack of public acceptance of government institutions, identity-based polarisation, an inability of the government to ensure that basic needs of citizens are met) were and still are present (Brown 2009; Harris and Goldsmith, 2009). Beginning in 2006, this manifested itself violently with serious civil unrest erupting in the capital and continuing sporadically up

¹⁷ Turnaround, as an outcome measure (Chauvet and Collier, 2005) is defined by three conditions: (1) The durable cessation of violent conflict; (2) sustained economic activity; and (3) sustained improvements in human development indicators.

until 2008 with attempted assassinations of the Prime Minister and President. While the violence has since abated, the tensions underlying them have not. The government's apparent failure to diffuse public dissatisfaction is noted with growing concern by international observers (Scambary, 2009). Increasingly the public is losing trust in its elected decision-makers as allegations of corruption and a chronic lack of transparency in policy decisions rock state institutions (Harris and Goldsmith, 2009).

Perhaps in the case of Timor-Leste's curriculum reforms the cart has come before the horse. There is no doubt that there was (and still is) a need and public desire to alter processes of teaching and learning that were (and still are) irrelevant and reproducing poor outcomes. It is not clear, however, that policy designers carefully considered the manner in which this change could best lead to social and civic reconstruction. It has been suggested that donor agendas and the government's desire to follow them, has led to curriculum reform being driven by an agenda of state building (Millo and Barnett 2004; Carroll and Kupczyk-Romancuz, 2007). Success of such reform has come to be premised on the achievement of tangible benchmarks, embedded in global mandates such as *Education for All* and the *Millennium Development Goals* (MEC, 2005; MEYCS, 2007; Carroll and Kupczyk-Romancuz, 2007). While there is no dispute that the provision of quality education by the state to all citizens is an important component of a nation-building exercise, curriculum reform was also expected to serve other purposes such as reinforcing and promoting a new national identity, and ensuring a certain level of social cohesion amongst citizens.

The danger of prioritising actions aimed at state building over nation building through the reform of curriculum, is that it ignores the fact that the reconstruction of education systems is political, ideological, socially constructed and legitimate only if perceived as so by local actors (Vongalis-Macrow, 2006; Murray, 2008). As explored in this paper, curriculum reform is at the heart of debates around grand national narratives and perceptions of *whose* story should be promulgated officially. I would like to suggest that actions taken to construct an expeditious and efficient system of primary schooling, have come at the expense of social cohesion and state legitimacy.

For many Timorese, the primary education system under these reforms continues to fail in serving their basic interests or needs. The challenge, still unresolved for Timor-Leste, is for "education [to] change the workings of the fragile state, and in turn, or simultaneously, the state can bolster its legitimacy by providing mass education that actually deliver what it promises." (Davies 2009, p. 15) The reforms while symbolic of an apparent transformation of the state have yet to deliver on this bold promise.

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