

Looking inward, reaching out: Divergent visions of education reform in Timor-Leste

Estimated total word count: 52 paragraphs x 150 words (average) = 7,800 words

ABSTRACT

Much research in the anthropology of education has described the competing forces of localization and globalization in schooling systems around the world, and studies in the anthropology of development have examined the structures and strategies that attempt to bridge cultural divides in international development projects. Located at the intersection of these two fields, this study examines how foreign and local educational actors in Timor-Leste engage with the current basic-education curriculum reform, which is producing curricula, scripted lesson plans, and other classroom materials that aim to improve educational quality by adapting international best-practice models to the Timorese context. The research draws on two months of ethnographic fieldwork in the Ministry of Education and primary schools in the capital, Dili, using audiovisual recordings, participant-observation, semi-structured interviews, and text analysis. The resulting thesis comprises an article that explores actors' knowledge, understanding, and opinions of the reform, and a film that observes how actors enact and resist the reform. The key research finding is that actors' understandings and implementations of the reform are greatly inconsistent between the reform team and schools. These inconsistencies are the result of the actors' divergent visions, epistemologies and priorities relating to education and development, but also of their unequal access to information about the reform. This finding suggests that more needs to be done to build effective communication and consensus around the reform to improve its implementation and outcomes.

(230 words)

Keywords: curriculum reform, education reform, Timor-Leste, localization, globalization, appropriation, international development

Note: In article outline below, italicised points indicate what data/evidence will be used for each point.

ARTICLE OUTLINE

A. Introduction

(~750 words)

1. **Context of the research:** Short geopolitical, historical overview of the country, background of previous reforms, and description of the current reform project.
2. **Positioning:** My own personal connection to Timor-Leste and the reform project; why I did this research, what I wanted to find out.
3. **Main argument and outline of findings:** Inconsistent understanding and implementation of reform between researched groups can be explained by divergent visions of education/development, working priorities, and access to information about the reform. Language policy is a 'red thread' that runs through all sections and forms a key case of each finding.
4. **Academic and social relevance:** Academic relevance to debates in anthropology of education and anthropology of development (see abstract and lit review); social relevance because can feed back into policy mechanisms and future improvements of the reform (Olivier de Sardan, 2007; Mosse 2005; Mosse 2006).
5. **Road map of article:** Brief outline of each section.

B. Methodology and Ethics

(~750 words)

6. **Description of research:** Timeframe, location, sites, main subject groups, research questions; limitations re. time, certain reform activities inaccessible (e.g., teacher training, mentoring visits).
7. **Methods:** Participant observation, 37 interviews, 15 classroom observations, text analysis, audiovisual ethnography used in conjunction with all other methods
8. **'Insider ethnography'** (Mosse 2005): The double-edged sword of my position as reform staff member, i.e., the access it gave me and obstacles it presented.
9. **Ethical challenges:** including position as 'insider', teacher quality concerns, protection of subjects (esp. with visual representation/lack of anonymity) (drawing on WS assignment 4&5).
10. **The impact of visual methods on the research:** types of data collected, how visual methods shaped the research focus/questions and path the fieldwork took, engagement of participants with the camera, etc.

C. Theoretical Framework

(~1,350 words)

11. **Introduction:** research sits in cross-section of anthropology of education and anthropology of international development.
12. **Anthropology of education:** overview of main debates, sources, relevant concepts
13. **Concept 1: Appropriation** (Anderson-Levitt 2003; Anderson-Levitt & Diallo 2003; Napier 2003, Verger & Altinyelken 2015; Shah & Quinn 2014)
14. **Concept 2: Polycscape** (Carney 2009; Vavrus & Bartlett 2012; Verger & Altinyelken 2015)
15. **Concept 3: Curriculum reform** (Shah 2012; Shah & Quinn 2014; Napier 2003)
16. **Anthropology of development:** overview of main debates, sources, relevant concepts
17. **Concept 4: 'Enrolment'** (Mosse 2005)
18. **Concept 7: Scientific/technical vs. traditional/popular knowledge** (Olivier de Sardan 2007)
19. **Conclusion:** how the concepts relate to one another and are operationalized in my research.

- 20. Introduction and main argument/finding of this section:** Understandings of the reform objectives and methodologies are very different between reform staff and school-level actors.
- 21. Description of the 3 official pillars of the curriculum reform:** (1) changing pedagogy; (2) changing language (including language progression plan methodology); and (3) contextualizing (localizing) the curriculum to Timor-Leste.
- *Reference to interviews with Vice Minister, MoE advisor, and government documents that outline these pillars.*
- 22. Overview** of the generalizable trends in educational actors' understanding of these pillars.
- 23. Foreign actors:** Foreign reform staff, development partners, and MoE advisors generally identify all 3 pillars, with many more foreigners than Timorese identifying the localization goal.
- *Data on how many international consultants and development partners identified each of the 3 pillars; representative quotes*
- 24. Timorese consultants on the reform team:** Generally, these actors identify pedagogical and linguistic changes as objective, but only a few identify the localization goal.
- *Data on how many Timorese consultants identified each of the 3 pillars; representative quotes*
- 25. Timorese teachers and school actors:** Timorese teachers seconded (loaned) to the reform team and those in schools generally don't identify (m)any of the 3 pillars, instead referring to a general need to improve quality and outcomes, or saying they don't know what the reform objectives are.
- *Data on how many Timorese teachers (in the reform team and in schools) identified each of the 3 pillars; representative quotes*
- 26. Teacher qualifications and teacher quality:** Data from classroom observations on how teachers' understanding of the reform objectives, methodologies, and curriculum content are translated into practice in their teaching. (Because this is a practice-focused component, it will mostly be addressed in the film, but I will summarise this aspect as important to the argument, especially in relation to gaps in teachers' knowledge.)
- *Classroom observation of teacher who didn't understand fractions/decimals (ethical dilemma)*
 - *Classroom observations of teachers speaking incorrect Portuguese*
 - *Teacher biographical data on whiteboard in staffroom at Aimutin that shows teacher education/qualification levels, and school director interview quotes re. teacher qualifications.*
- 27. Language policy:** Lack of knowledge about language progression plan and common misconception among teachers that Portuguese was being 'replaced' by Tetun, rather than that Tetun is being used to teach better literacy skills with the ultimate aim of improving students' Portuguese in later grades.
- *Data re. number of teachers that knew about language progression plan; representative quotes*
- 28. Implications of the mismatched understandings across levels/sites:** Great scope for things going off-track, because – despite the scripted lesson plans – teachers can and do implement the curriculum in unplanned or undesired ways, or don't implement it at all.
- *Examples from classroom observations, incl. Amélia doing RFT literacy exercises wrong*
- 29. Concluding paragraph linking to next two sections:** These inconsistent understandings can be explained by divergent visions, epistemologies, and priorities (section E), and ineffective communication and media practices (section F).

E. ‘Divergent Discourses: Visions, epistemologies, and priorities of reform’ (~1,350 words)

- 30. Introduction and main argument of this section:** The inconsistent understandings of the reform can be partially explained by the different visions of education/development (and opposite uses of concepts of ‘localization’ and ‘internationalization’ between foreign and local actors), epistemologies (foreign actors base their knowledge in scientific evidence; local actors in empirical evidence/experience), and priorities.
- 31. The foreign vision:** The foreign vision generally wants to localize content (by using Timorese examples, materials, stories, history, etc.) and internationalize pedagogy (child-centered learning).
- *Number of international (vs. Timorese) actors who referred to importance of localization of curriculum content and of ‘modernizing’ pedagogy; representative quotes*
- 32. The local vision:** The local vision generally wants to internationalize content (‘update’ the curriculum with the international canon of learning/knowledge) but retain local pedagogy (lecture-and-listen; hierarchical models). Important: highly educated Timorese who work with foreigners are more aligned with foreign vision, and there is a spectrum of visions.
- *Number of Timorese (vs. foreign) actors who referred to importance of maintaining local (‘traditional’) pedagogy and/or expressed desire for Timor-Leste to be part of international community and have a ‘modern education system’; representative quotes*
- 33. Colonial legacies and the local/foreign conundrum:** Given schooling was introduced to Timor-Leste by the Portuguese colonizers and then continued by the Indonesian occupation, ‘traditional’ pedagogy is in fact a localized version of colonial, foreign pedagogical systems introduced to Timor-Leste. Hence, it is difficult to draw neat lines between what is ‘local’ and ‘foreign’.
- 34. Language policy:** A key example of the colonial legacy and major controversy with the reform is the language policy of introducing Tetun alongside Portuguese into the curriculum.
- *Respondents’ views on the roles of Portuguese and Tetun in the education system.*
- 35. Epistemological differences:** Foreigners base their positions on scientific evidence (hence support of ‘evidence-based’ models), whereas Timorese base their positions on more empirical evidence / personal experience (hence rejection of ‘evidence-based’ models). This leads to support for / belief in different educational approaches and models.
- 36. The ‘statistics’ / ‘evidence’ epistemology:** Detail on this epistemology, how it relates to aspects of the curriculum reform, and data from interviews, etc., that show how (often) it is invoked.
- *Examples of how many times words like ‘evidence’, ‘research’, ‘data’ are used in interviews with international actors (e.g., 8 times in Susanne Owen’s interview); representative quotes*
- 37. The ‘storytelling’ / ‘experience’ epistemology:** Same as above, but for this epistemology.
- *Examples of Timorese actors referring to experience in their pedagogical preferences*
 - *Aimutin Director asking me about the Australian school system – seeking information about other systems through personal connections, experience, and stories (not data, research, etc.)*
- 38. Priorities:** A description of the key challenges identified by school-level actors, including low salaries, over-crowded classrooms, poor infrastructure, minimal (or missing) materials. Essentially, the reform is not addressing what they consider to be the major priorities of the education system – the practical things like buildings, books, and salaries – and is instead focusing on things they see as peripheral – like pedagogy, language, and contextualization. Hence, they see the reform as (at least in part) unimplementable and are unmotivated to invest in making change.
- *School director Rogério: ‘Let’s take care of quantity first, then we can look at quality.’*
 - *Various teachers’ complaints re. overcrowded classrooms, lack of materials, etc., and responses to interview questions about challenges for the education system.*
- 39. Resistance:** Teachers’ priorities also lead some of them to resist the reform, or implement it selectively, rather than implement it as a whole (Olivier de Sardan 2007).

- 40. Introduction and main argument of this section:** Another key factor in the divergent understandings of the reform is the complexities of the reform's communication media and practices. While visions, epistemologies and priorities (section E) are important, the lack of clear and accurate information about the reform reaching school-level actors also affects their understanding of the reform, and ultimately their engagement/implementation of it.
- 41. Perceptions of communication success/failure:** Perceptions among respondents of the MoE has communicated the reform to stakeholders, especially schools.
- *E.g., interview with Sofia (international reform staff) re. 'failure' of communication to all stakeholders; interviews with school actors about lack of communication / mixed messages*
- 42. The problem of relying on written communication in an 'oral culture'.** Noting that most reform communication media and practices are in textual form, yet Timor-Leste is a predominantly oral culture, including among teachers.
- *Interview quotes on this from international reform staff, development partners, etc.*
 - *Research on rates of literacy, reading, when Tetun became a written language, etc.*
- 43. Printed reform materials:** Explanation of how lesson plans and other printed reform materials are used to communicate reform objectives and methodologies to teachers.
- *Examples of lesson plans that outline methodology, objectives, etc.*
 - *Text of Foreword from Vice Minister used in various materials.*
 - *Data on how often I saw teachers using printed materials.*
- 44. Audiovisual reform materials:** A short side-note describing the content and objectives of the ABCs TV literacy show and training videos produced for the reform. (Covered more in film.)
- 45. Distribution and delivery of materials:** Not only the content of the reform materials, but their physical presence (or absence) at schools is hugely important, and has an impact not only on whether teachers can fully implement the curriculum, but on their will to do so. Complexities around logistics and distribution are also a key concern at the reform team level, relating to work pressure and deadlines, and causing internal tensions between Ministry teams/departments.
- 46. Reform communication practices:** Teacher trainings and mentoring visits are generally reported as being poor quality (acknowledging I only have second-hand information about these practices).
- *Anecdotes about training quality, depth, and effectiveness from teachers and reform staff*
 - *Conversation with Lamdor (reform team) about her mentoring visit to schools where she stepped in and taught the class; said teachers weren't using lesson plans.*
 - *Email from Debbie Katzman with language directives document for trainers to address misconceptions about the reform language policy.*
- 47. External media and discourse:** Newspapers are a key source of information for school actors about the reform, highlighting the debates, mixed messages, and controversies about the reform.
- *Newspaper clippings:*
 - *'System of language instruction causing confusion in schools'*
 - *'Teachers shouldn't question the use of Portuguese in the classroom'*
 - *'Ministry of Education Maintains Old Curriculum'*
 - *'Timorese PM wants teachers to teach Portuguese in all schools in the country'*
- 48. Political / legal controversy:** A lack of consensus and unity within the MoE and challenges to the reform in Parliament are a large part of the mixed messages that reach teachers through the media, compounding the inaccessibility of laws and policy documents.
- *Quote from Debbie Katzman re. the impact of political challenges on reform implementation.*
 - *Notes from school observation of conversations questioning the legal basis of reform.*

49. Summary of findings and argument.

50. Implications of the research for the reform: Findings show that globalizing and localizing trends/goals are not neatly attributable to foreign and local actors, respectively. Findings point to the need to harness communication practices — including teacher training and the upcoming Australian Aid-funded mentoring program — to clarify reform objectives and methodologies (esp. language policy) to school-level actors. Re. epistemologies, findings would suggest to reframe references to evidence and research as stories of empirical evidence and personal experience (Olivier de Sardan, 2007:151) in communication to school-level actors. (Reform training films might be doing this, and if so, this research suggests it's a good approach.)

51. Possible avenues for future research: include the potential role of reform brokers and translators (Mosse and Lewis 2006) to bridge the divide between these divergent visions, understandings, and engagements with the reform, through the Australian Aid-funded national mentoring project and government-run teacher training; changes over time in the understanding of, and 'enrolment' in, the reform, as implementation continues; and the potential for comparative studies between Timor-Leste and other countries (e.g., other former Portuguese colonies) with similar historical/political backgrounds and linguistic/ethnic diversity.

52. Closing: Clarify my position, i.e., that the reform project is a great opportunity for decolonizing the education system, improving educational outcomes, connecting Timor-Leste to the world, and contributing to the nation's development goals (economic, social, security, etc.). However, significant changes to the communication of the reform and a commitment to building consensus across the education sector need to take place in order for this opportunity to bear fruit.

Bibliography