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# Competing visions of education in Timor-Leste's curriculum reform

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*Timor-Leste's independence in 2002 marked the end of centuries of foreign control. Early post-independence education reforms successfully increased school enrolments and rebuilt education infrastructure, however, teacher qualifications and student outcomes have remained poor. The current Curriculum Reform, initiated in 2013, aims to improve educational quality in the first six years of schooling by adapting international best practices to the Timorese context, fundamentally reshaping the curriculum's approach to language, content and pedagogy. Located at the intersection of current debates in the anthropologies of education and international development, this paper examines how diverse educational actors in Timor-Leste translate Curriculum Reform policy into practice. The research draws on two months of ethnographic fieldwork in the capital, Dili, and on the author's professional experience as editor of the Curriculum Reform. The key finding is that, while all actors share a common goal of creating a quality education system that contributes to Timor-Leste's development, school and reform staff translate policy into practice in inconsistent ways. The paper argues that these inconsistencies are the result of the actors' divergent visions of education, their working conditions, and their unequal access to information about the reform. These factors are compared across the reform pillars of language, curriculum content, and pedagogy for those who create policy (reform staff) and those who are tasked with implementing it (school staff).*

*Keywords:* Timor-Leste; curriculum reform; localization; visions of education

## INTRODUCTION

While the goals of the Strategic Development Plan are consistent with the Millennium Development Goals, they are tailored to reflect the unique history, culture and heritage of Timor-Leste . . . Our vision is that all Timorese children should attend school and receive a quality education that gives them the knowledge and skills to lead healthy, productive lives and to actively contribute to our nation's development. *Timor-Leste Strategic Development Plan 2011–2030* (RDTL, 2011a, p. 16)

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The small state of Timor-Leste (East Timor) shares an island with Indonesian West Timor and has a population of approximately 1.2 million people. Timor-Leste became independent in 2002 following centuries of Portuguese colonization (early 1500–1975), a 24-year Indonesian military occupation (1975–1999), and three years of United Nations administration (1999–2002). These eras of foreign control also delineated the periods of pre-independence education (Beck, 2008; Nicolai, 2004; Shah & Quinn, 2014), characterized by the imposition of a foreign schooling system that prioritized ‘colonial epistemologies’ (Shah & Lopes Cardozo, 2016, p. 4) over local knowledge systems. Bequeathed this legacy of foreign schooling in a razed country, Timor-Leste has faced enormous challenges in (re)building its education system. These challenges have been further exacerbated by dwindling oil reserves in an oil-dependent economy, a lack of local industry, and a huge youth population experiencing high rates of unemployment. Due to the focus on rebuilding infrastructure, replenishing the depleted teaching force, and getting children back to school in the years immediately after independence, early curricula interventions remained dependent on foreign assistance and were minimally adapted to Timorese culture and conditions (Beck, 2008; Quinn, 2013; Shah, 2012).

In 2013, the Ministry of Education initiated the current Curriculum Reform of the first and second ‘cycles’, which comprise the first six of nine grades of ‘universal, compulsory and free’ basic education (RDTL, 2011b, p. 9). Managed and funded by the Ministry, with some international donor support, the reform aims to improve educational outcomes by creating a uniquely Timorese education system and enabling young citizens to contribute to the development of the sovereign nation and make it competitive in the global economy (RDTL, 2011a). It does this by both ‘internationalizing’ teaching with global ‘best practices’, such as learner-centered pedagogy and language-progression methodologies, and ‘localizing’ education through the use of local language and content relevant to Timorese culture, history, and the environment. These aims are not new for Timor-Leste: curricular programs since independence have sought to capitalize on the potential of education to build national unity and identity, create a locally relevant curriculum, and introduce learner-centered pedagogy (Shah, 2012; Shah & Quinn, 2014). However, the 2013 Curriculum Reform is the first curriculum to be completely developed in-country and represents an unprecedented investment in curriculum development by the Timorese Ministry of Education.

The Ministry formed a team specifically for the project, of which I was part from August 2014 to March 2017. The team included Timorese teachers on secondment from schools, Timorese consultants with higher education (often from Australia, New Zealand, and Indonesia), and ‘international’ (mostly American, Australian and Portuguese) consultants with specialist subject knowledge. The team has produced new curricula for eight subjects, scripted lesson plans for teachers, and various educational materials, including textbooks, posters, and even a literacy TV show. Ongoing consultation with a broad range of stakeholders, including teachers, civil society, development partners, religious leaders, veterans, academics and other national figures, informed the development of the curriculum and, in particular, the content of the scripted lesson plans and textbooks. Phased implementation introduced the curriculum to two of the six primary-school grades annually between 2015 and 2017.

Drawing on two months of ethnographic fieldwork in early 2016 and my professional experience as the editor of the Curriculum Reform, this article is a summary of a larger thesis, which included text and an ethnographic film (Ogden, 2016). This article outlines

how competing logics of internationalization and localization between the reform team and primary schools play out in the development and early implementation of the Curriculum Reform across three of its pillars: language, content, and pedagogy.

### **CONCEPTUAL FRAMEWORK**

The tension between global education policy and the localization of national education policy has been thoroughly debated in the anthropology of education and comparative and international education for several years (e.g., Anderson-Levitt, 2003). Localization—the contextualization of global policies to unique national realities—has become an international trend; however, the implementation of localized policies has not been a magic solution for the problems they address (e.g., Anderson-Levitt, 2003; Mosse, 2004; Shah & Lopes Cardozo, 2016). The translation of policy into practice remains complex and anything but linear, and several authors have debated whether education reform really happens at the policy level or inside classrooms (Anderson-Levitt, 2003; Paine & Zeichner, 2012; Verger, Novelli & Altinyelken, 2015). Given the prevalence of localization policies within the ‘developing’ world, debates from the anthropology of international development are also relevant, including those analyzing the relationship between the formulation of policy and the social realities of its implementation (Crewe & Axelby, 2013; Mosse, 2005, 2006, 2013; Olivier de Sardan, 2005). This article adds a recent Timorese case study to these debates. Below, I define the five main concepts drawn from the literature that shape my argument: visions of education, working environments, communications, policy, and appropriation.

Visions of education here refers to the individual and collective bundles of ideas about, to paraphrase Paine and Zeichner (2012, p. 577), the value and purpose of schooling, what knowledge is valuable and necessary, and what effective teaching and learning consist of. The concept also draws on the notions of ‘epistemological diversity’ (Vavrus & Bartlett, 2012), which underpins individuals’ and institutions’ understandings and enactments of educational ideas, and ‘voice’ (Juffermans & Van der Aa, 2013), which, in educational discourses, contains both ideologies about education and actors’ personal histories and contexts.

The following two concepts, working environments and communications, are two primary aspects of the reform’s implementation context. Working environments comprise the set of material, professional and social resources available to actors that shape both their visions of education and the practical parameters within which they interpret and enact educational policy (Shah & Lopes Cardozo, 2016; Vavrus & Bartlett, 2012). They include factors like the physical condition of working environments, access to materials, exposure to and contact with foreigners (and by extension, foreign ideas and systems), and the presence and use of technology. Communications media and practices here refer to the set of mechanisms that convey the Curriculum Reform to actors, and the information those mechanisms convey. They include office meetings, trimestral week-long teacher training, lesson-plan manuals, syllabuses and other printed reform materials, politicians’ statements, and newspaper articles about education, as well as word of mouth. The concept incorporates the form and content, as well as the context of reception of these communication media and practices. For example, the premise that Timor-Leste has an ‘oral culture’ rather than a literate tradition has implications for the effectiveness of the printed Curriculum Reform materials provided to school actors.

Policy is an amorphous concept that many authors use to reference overarching trends and principles, vision and values, management systems, and learning processes (e.g., Verger et al., 2015), while others expand that definition to also include the detailed minutiae that such policies produce (e.g., Mosse, 2004). Here, I follow Mosse's (2004) broader conception of policy to refer to both the guiding principles of the Curriculum Reform (e.g., localization and learner-centered pedagogy), its specific strategies and designs (e.g., the curriculum itself) and its supplementary materials (e.g., lesson-plan manuals).

Finally, I use appropriation to refer to the ways in which educational actors understand, adapt, and enact education policies through their own visions of education and within their contextual parameters. In the literature, appropriation refers to the myriad ways in which transnational policies are adapted to diverse local discursive and material contexts (e.g., Anderson-Levitt, 2003; Vavrus & Bartlett, 2012). It is the process of translating policy into practice across various scales (international to national to local), often with unexpected or unintended consequences (e.g., Paine & Zeichner, 2012; Shah & Lopes Cardozo, 2016; Verger et al., 2015). These unintended outcomes are not purely the result of the misunderstanding or miscommunication of policies: actors also deliberately resist or selectively implement policies in line with their own interests and visions of education, especially when they perceive policies as being unfairly imposed (Bartlett & Vavrus, 2014; Lopes Cardozo, 2012; Olivier de Sardan, 2005).

## METHODOLOGY

I conducted fieldwork in two main sites in the capital, Dili: the Ministry of Education's Curriculum Reform office and one focal primary school with 1,200 students and 27 teachers. For comparison, I visited two other primary schools for a half-day each. I employed qualitative research methods, which Bartlett & Vavrus argue are particularly valuable for researching educational policy due to 'their ability to move beyond the professed aims of policy to examine how policies are made and contested at various levels' (2014, p. 140). These methods included participant observation of general work activities and staff meetings in the reform office and in the staffroom and playground of the focal school; 37 semi-structured interviews using a core set of questions (18 with reform staff, 13 with school staff from the 3 schools, 3 with Ministry of Education officials and consultants, and 3 with donor representatives); 19 classroom observations of grades 1, 2 and 3 across the 3 schools, to encompass teachers using the new curriculum for both the first and second year; analysis of government documents and reform materials; and audiovisual recordings at the reform office and focal school.

The research was conducted mostly in Tetun and English, with some Portuguese, depending on the primary language and preference of each participant, and I translated all dialogue and texts. The diversity of my research participants, including teachers and school coordinators (principals), Timorese ('national') and foreign ('international') Curriculum Reform staff, politicians, and international donor representatives, reflected a comparative, multi-scalar approach across various levels of policy and practice, inspired by Vavrus and Bartlett's (2014) Vertical Case Study approach. The two primary groups of research participants, Curriculum Reform staff and school staff, are the focus of this paper.

I analyzed my ethnographic data by coding interview transcripts, participant observation notes and classroom observation notes by key themes (e.g., localization, language, visions of education, pedagogy) and comparing these themes across participants and sites. Basic statistics from classroom observations were compiled across various criteria (including class size, time allocations to subjects, teacher dialogue, activity type, spatial arrangement, use of lesson plans, language use, etc.). My continued professional involvement on the Curriculum Reform throughout all research stages created a dialogic dynamic, providing examples and counter-examples of the themes and trends in the fieldwork data.

My role as the Curriculum Reform's editor involved copyediting curricula, storybooks and thousands of lesson plans in Tetun across the six basic-education grades. I am not a trained educator; rather, I came to work in education programs through my background in editing and organizational development in Timor-Leste. While my role on the Curriculum Reform centered around ensuring stylistic consistency across all reform materials, it sometimes involved providing feedback on content and pedagogy. However, I was not responsible for writing materials, nor was I involved in the development of policy or curricula.

My professional involvement in the Curriculum Reform had significant ramifications on my research of it. What Mosse (2006) describes as 'insider ethnography' is not unusual in education research and has its benefits and drawbacks. Each role informs and reshapes the other, and these blurred lines between pure and applied anthropology (McNess, Arthur & Crossley, 2015) are gaining increasing academic acceptance as productive and valid (Crewe & Axelby, 2013; Mosse, 2013).

My hybrid position had both methodological and ethical implications for the research. Methodologically, it engendered trust with some participants, while erecting barriers with others. Ethically, it forced me to reckon with the impact on my professional relationships of my subjects' diverse and contradictory perspectives (McNess et al., 2015; Mosse, 2006) and demanded constant vigilance about the potential impact of my professional biases on my academic output (Crewe & Axelby, 2013, p. 43). Ultimately, each position complemented and challenged the assumptions of the other, enriching the resulting ethnography.

## **VISIONS OF EDUCATION**

In what follows, I outline the school and reform visions of education through descriptions of how each group of actors engages with language, content, and pedagogy in the Curriculum Reform. However, these are polarized extremes of what is really a spectrum of visions. Describing these extremes facilitates comparisons across general trends, but each actor occupies a nuanced position along the spectrum. The main contextual factors that I identified as shaping these positions include actors' skills and knowledge, material constraints, and the communication of reform policy and materials. I now briefly outline how these factors affect teachers' appropriations of the reform policy in practice, and specific examples are provided in the sections below.

With an education system still playing catch-up following the decimation of infrastructure and contraction of the teaching force in 1999, a significant proportion of Timor-Leste's teachers have minimal qualifications. Quinn (2013), referring to government data, writes that 'over 23% of teachers have no teacher qualification . . . and 11% have a post-secondary qualification in teacher training' (p. 184). In 2011, '[m]ore than 75% of

teachers [were] not qualified to the levels required by law (RDTL, 2011a, p. 21). These statistics resonated with my fieldwork observations: many teachers had not mastered the content they were teaching. This long-standing issue is now compounded by the transmission of the curriculum content through lesson-plan manuals. Every trimester of each grade has a lesson-plan manual, often more than 800 pages long. The rationale for using scripted lesson plans is that they provide daily in-service support in a context of inadequate training and under-qualification. However, the sheer volume of written material for teachers to read is intimidating, especially in what many reform actors described as an ‘oral culture’ with a relatively new literate tradition. The dilemma of how to bridge the gaps between teacher knowledge and skills, and the new curriculum are widely acknowledged by reform staff.

Even when teachers do have sufficient academic skills to teach the new curriculum contents, material constraints make this difficult. Classroom overcrowding was identified as an implementation challenge by more than half the school actors I interviewed. Two of the schools I visited had an average of 40 students per class; the other had an average of 50. Some classrooms I observed had more than 60 students; others were reported to have almost 70. In 2015 the average class size in Dili was 42 students, while the national average was 31 (Ministry of Education, [moe.gov.tl/?q=node/217](http://moe.gov.tl/?q=node/217)). Many schools address overcrowding by accommodating two or three shifts of classes per day, subsequently reducing total classroom time for each child. These material constraints, along with teachers’ own visions of education, shape how they prioritize curriculum content and implement the reform’s pedagogy.

Finally, the communication of the reform’s objectives, principles and methodologies has been characterized by ‘conceptual vagueness’ (Lopes Cardozo, 2012, p. 760). Not only are much of the content and the pedagogical approach unfamiliar for teachers, but the communication of the reform has generally been confused and opaque: the public voice of the Ministry of Education has been splintered by mixed messages from various politicians; delays and undersupply of reform materials to schools was a common complaint among both school and reform actors; and a number of participants described the reform’s teacher training, delivered via a cascade model,<sup>2</sup> as using lecture-style methods rather than modelling the learner-centered pedagogy the teachers are now expected to use.

### Language

The *Constitution of the Democratic Republic of Timor-Leste (2002)* recognizes Portuguese and Tetun as the nation’s two official languages and acknowledges the existence of several local languages (article 13), while designating English and Indonesian as ‘working languages’ (article 159). In the education sector, language has been a contentious issue since independence (Quinn, 2013). Although Tetun is the nation’s *lingua franca* and Portuguese is spoken fluently by only a minority of the population (Quinn, 2013, p. 163), Portuguese was the language of the first post-independence primary-school curriculum, in which Tetun was designated an ‘auxiliary

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<sup>2</sup> In ‘cascade’ training, each individual who receives training in turn provides the training to several others, often repeated through several layers to reach very large groups; in this case, all teachers nationwide. The model, often used in resource-poor contexts, is popular because it is cheap, but is commonly criticized for distorting and diluting information as it passes through the various levels.

language' (Taylor-Leech, 2008, p. 162). The 2013 Curriculum Reform makes Tetun the primary language of instruction for the first time and introduces a language-progression methodology that slowly introduces Portuguese as a foreign language. This approach is intended to ensure students are proficient in both Tetun and Portuguese by the end of Grade 6, because the secondary school curriculum is in Portuguese. Tetun and Portuguese are both subjects in their own right (that is, Tetun Literacy and Portuguese Literacy), as well as languages of instruction for other subjects. The reform's language policy is premised on the notion that students learn best in a language they understand and on studies showing that teaching in Portuguese has been ineffective in Timor-Leste. For example, a 2010 World Bank study that found that '[m]ore than 70% of students at the end of grade 1 could not read a single word' of a simple passage, with this rate dropping to 40 per cent and 20 per cent in grades 2 and 3, respectively (Amorim, Stevens & Gacougnolle, 2010, p. 2). However, given that '[l]anguage policy debates are always about more than language' (Taylor-Leech, 2008, p. 153), this controversial feature of the Curriculum Reform provides a useful starting point for contrasting the school and reform visions of education.

Language is a key aspect of the school vision's focus on internationalization, which positions Portuguese as a 'window to the world' that will enable students to work and study overseas as members of an international community. This position also stems from the fact that schooling was, for centuries, a foreign system that provided direct access to concrete privileges (Taylor-Leech, 2008, p. 154-7). As such, many school actors accept school as a place where children learn things disconnected from their daily lives (Sarangapani, 2003; see also 'Content').

Almost all school actors were themselves educated in Portuguese or Indonesian and refer to their own experience as evidence of the effectiveness of such a model. A majority of school actors (7 of the 10 with whom I discussed language) expressed concern about the reduction of Portuguese in the new curriculum; nine expressed support for its continuation. Shah (2012) reported that Portuguese as language of instruction was an unpopular choice among teachers at the time of the first post-independence curriculum.

My data, conversely, show strong support for Portuguese in schools, consistent with Quinn (2013, p. 182), despite the fact that most teachers themselves do not speak the language proficiently. The discrepancy may reflect the effect of the 'vacuum of information' about policy goals and concepts, leading teachers 'to continue with the last policy with which they were familiar' (Shah & Lopes Cardozo, 2016, p. 7). Portuguese is also seen as deeply connected to Timorese history and identity (Taylor-Leech, 2008, p. 157) by many school actors. Several mentioned the use of Portuguese as a code language to evade Indonesian surveillance during the resistance. Interestingly, no school actors referred to Tetun as part of the Timorese identity when asked to explain their language preferences. Another reason for this preference for Portuguese over Tetun in the curriculum is a perception that Tetun is insufficiently developed. Five of ten school actors said Tetun's rightful role is as an auxiliary language to Portuguese, as per the previous curriculum, a similar finding to Taylor-Leech (2008, p. 162).

Conversely, Tetun is at the center of the reform's vision regarding language. Every single interviewed reform actor supported Tetun as the main language of instruction. In contrast to the school actors, Timorese reform staff referred to their own difficulties learning in Portuguese and Indonesian as evidence of the need to teach children in Tetun, and many did view Tetun as part of the Timorese identity, similar to findings in other studies

(Taylor-Leech, 2008, p. 158). The reform vision posits that Tetun is indeed sufficient as a language of instruction, and many reform staff emphasized that Timorese people's *knowledge* of Tetun's written form, rather than the language itself, is insufficiently developed.

The distance between the school and reform visions regarding language is exacerbated by the (mis)communication of the reform. All three school leaders complained of either mixed messages from government officials or the lack of information about the language-progression methodology. These problems are compounded by teachers' limited exposure to the methodology's full scope across all grades due to the reform's staged implementation; the effect of 'cascade' teacher training; and the media's unclear and inconsistent reporting on the topic.<sup>3</sup> The reform team is aware of these miscommunications and has taken steps to address them through clarifications in teacher training, but these are again prone to the dilution of the cascade model.

This miscommunication has contributed to teachers resisting or appropriating the policy to their own vision. One school coordinator explained that teachers feel disheartened that the new language policy seemingly wastes years of time and energy invested in learning Portuguese. This same coordinator advises teachers to use more Portuguese so as not to disadvantage students academically. Other examples of appropriation were abundant in classroom observations. Teachers regularly used Portuguese when teaching other subjects, even Tetun Literacy. Within the time constraints of shifts in overcrowded schools, many teachers enact the school vision of language in their selectivity of the subjects they teach, with Portuguese Literacy consuming proportionately much more class time than allocated in the official timetable (see 'Content' below).

### Content

It is important to distinguish between two clear forms of localization of curriculum content. The first is the inclusion of explicitly local content, including Timorese history, geography, music, arts, and permaculture practices, with the objective 'to strengthen our Timorese identity and values,' and 'look at the onus of being proud of your ancestors and your traditional culture and traditional belief systems,' as described by a national and an international reform consultant, respectively. The second form is the contextualization of (abstract or universal) concepts through the use of local materials and examples, with a clear pedagogical function in its focus on experiential learning. For example, market shopping scenarios are used to calculate additions in Mathematics; local fruits are used to construct a model of the solar system in Natural Science; and students conduct research on their families' daily hygiene routines in Health. One international consultant described this type of localization as 'mak[ing] links to the experience of the student' when teaching content that is either 'related to everyone's life here or . . . to the international canon of what people should know'. National reform staff also identified this objective of localization to increase learning effectiveness and information recall.

Localization features prominently in the reform vision of curriculum content, and the majority of interviewed reform staff named localization as a reform objective, providing

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<sup>3</sup> Recent newspaper headlines include: It's a 'patriotic duty' to learn Portuguese in Timor-Leste, says the Minister of Education. (2016, 9 June). *Timor Agora*; Ministry of Education maintains old curriculum. (2016, 10 January). *Timor Post*; Students who speak Tetun will be fined 1 dollar' (2016, 13 July). *Timor Post*.



rationale and examples like those above. The same was not true for school staff. When asked what has changed in the new curriculum, many pointed to language and the scripted lesson plans. In many interviews, I pressed further, asking about changes in curriculum content. Not one interviewed teacher mentioned anything relating to local(ized) content.

This is not to say that Timorese nationalism or identity are absent from the school vision. But, similar to its position on language, the school vision considers the *internationalization*—not localization—of content the best way to ‘catch up’ to the developed world, secure future prosperity, and affirm Timor-Leste’s place as a modern, sovereign nation in the international community. This position is not surprising. As described above, schooling in Timor-Leste has always been a foreign system that prioritizes foreign epistemologies, whose abstraction and disconnection from local realities historically conferred concrete social privileges on its students.

Although they did not agree with this position, Timorese reform staff understood this mindset, noting that it was prominent in their own families and educational experiences. One described it thus: ‘In reality, parents do a lot of things related to science, but they don’t know how to explain them. They say that if you want to learn science, you have to go to school’. Both national and international reform staff explained that some people think learning local culture and language is backward, a position commonly found in international educational research (e.g., Lopes Cardozo, 2012; Sarangapani, 2003, p. 202). One international consultant explained that she considered such a position a misinterpretation of localization. Indeed, she viewed the Timorese education system *prior* to the Curriculum Reform as backward: ‘We need to move Timor into . . . the current age. Because it really is . . . what schools were like fifty years ago’. Keeping pace with global changes is an objective of both the reform and school visions of education, but one that is understood differently: while school actors generally do not see the function of localization in service of that goal, reform staff do.

Localization does not, however, erase other obstacles, including gaps in teachers’ own knowledge. One commonly mentioned example of the previous curriculum’s lack of localization is the use of pizza slices to teach fractions. Several reform staff pointed out that few Timorese children know what pizza is, let alone eat it. Hence, the solution was to swap pizza with familiar foods. I observed one Grade 3 teacher use local fruits to teach simple fractions. However, he did not understand the difference between a fraction and a decimal number (‘One-point-two is the same as one-over-two’, he said), and he ordered sequentially the equal quarters of a mango (1/1, 1/2, 1/3, 1/4).

Classroom overcrowding and the subsequent multiple shifts resulted in teachers being selective about which content they actually taught. Rather than reduce the time allocated to each lesson proportionately (e.g., from 50 to 30 minutes), teachers generally taught a smaller number of full lessons of their preferred subjects, often Portuguese Literacy. For example, despite constituting 10 per cent of the grades 2 and 3 timetable (averaged), my observations revealed that Portuguese Literacy was taught in over 30 per cent of lessons (6 of 19), while Tetun Literacy was taught slightly more than required in the official timetable (7 of 19). In my observations, Math was taught in line with its allocation, Natural Science and Social Science were all taught less than required, and Art and Culture, Physical Education, and Health were not taught at all.

## Pedagogy

The school and reform positions on localization and internationalization are reversed in regard to pedagogy. While reform actors embed ‘international’ pedagogical models in the curriculum, school actors appropriate these through a largely ‘local’ pedagogy that aligns with local social structures. These appropriations of the reform’s pedagogy echo similar findings of prior research in Timor-Leste (Shah & Lopes Cardozo, 2016; Shah & Quinn, 2014), suggesting that many of the same contextual factors remain, in spite of the reform’s focus on localization and intention to address problems of previous curricula.

The school vision of pedagogy reflects local or ‘traditional’ pedagogy (as many actors described it), centered around rote learning, infused with religion, and maintained through the teacher’s authority and control. This control commonly involves corporal punishment, and I saw several instances of ear-twisting and light slaps in classroom observations. One school coordinator saw corporal punishment as unfortunate but inevitable due to its cultural (and colonial) prevalence and parental support, despite his knowledge that the Curriculum Reform—and international law—prohibits it. Despite being a public school, religion was prominent: all classes at my focal school began and ended with a prayer; every classroom had a religious image on the wall; and teachers talked about religion’s ethical, pedagogical purpose in schooling. The moral role of teachers in helping to shape children into citizens is also part of the school vision of pedagogy. A common phrase is that education ‘makes people into people’ (*forma ema sai ema* in Tetun), perhaps also reflecting a colonial-era, missionary-style view of school’s role in shaping moral, civilized citizens (Shah & Lopes Cardozo, 2016, p. 10). Several teachers identified this role and its concomitant social prestige as part of their professional identity and their love of teaching.

The reform vision of pedagogy, conversely, focuses on engendering a love of learning in students, which is central to the reform’s most salient pedagogical feature: learner-centered pedagogy (LCP). An international consultant loosely described LCP as a way to ensure students are ‘involved [in] and a part of their own learning; it’s not just remembering something, it’s applying it as well. It’s also helping with life skills, being confident, you know, having faith in yourself, interacting with people—all of that stuff’. Two Timorese consultants explained that the reform aimed to ‘change the mentality’ around various social issues. The reform vision is explicitly anti-violence and secular (although many of the Timorese reform staff are devout Catholics). Perspectives on religion among the international reform staff ranged from complete contempt of religion in schooling as an intolerant, undemocratic relic that encouraged blind obedience, to a more pragmatic acceptance of its disciplining role to ‘keep things kind of tight’ in the transition to unfamiliar pedagogical territory in a post-conflict, post-colonial context.

Many international reform consultants referred to international research on the effectiveness of LCP to argue for its adoption in the Timorese curriculum, and they placed pedagogies on an evolutionary timeline rather than in different cultural spaces. One international reform consultant said that rote-learning might be appropriate in some (particularly Asian) cultures, but was not a ‘natural’ way for children to learn, unlike LCP. Another described international best practices as ‘an evolving science’ and LCP as ‘progressive pedagogy’, while labelling the common pedagogy in Timor-Leste as ‘old-style rote learning’. Yet, as other scholars have pointed out (e.g., Vavrus & Bartlett, 2012), LCP does not come from a universal, timeless vacuum. It is a culturally, historically and materially specific package of practices that interacts with local

conditions when transplanted to and appropriated in new contexts. Therefore, what is best practice in one context may not transfer easily to another.

While many school actors identified LCP as a feature of the new curriculum, their understandings of it revealed 'conceptual vagueness' (Lopes Cardozo, 2012), partly due to their unfamiliarity with the concept but also because of how it was communicated to teachers. Various teacher perceptions—for example, that students being active in class reduces teachers' workload, and that LCP substitutes 'real learning' for 'play'—were provided as reasons to either support or reject LCP, respectively. Many teachers recognized that LCP aims to increase student involvement, but rather than replace teachers as the font of authoritative knowledge, it altered their mechanisms for sharing that knowledge. For example, call-and-response and yes/no questions were common in my classroom observations, while invitations for students to provide considered responses or engage in group discussions were rare.

Contextual factors also affect the implementation of the reform's pedagogy. Overcrowding was a key reason that several school actors disagreed with, or outright rejected, the LCP-inspired change from seating students in rows to groups. Several teachers complained that group seating encouraged students to talk to each other rather than listen to the teacher, and that overcrowding meant that some students inevitably sat with their backs to the teacher—hence challenging the teacher's control and authority. The three schools I visited used varying approaches: one used only row seating, one used only group seating, and the other had classrooms in both configurations.

Certain communication practices were also problematic for the transmission of the reform's vision of pedagogy. Several reform staff acknowledged that the quality, model and frequency of teacher training does not sufficiently explain the reform's pedagogical approach to teachers (Lewin & Stuart, 2003, in Vavrus & Bartlett, 2012, p. 641). In addition to concerns about the aptness of scripted lesson plans in a predominantly oral culture (discussed above), some reform actors worried that the prescriptive plans would hinder teachers' creativity. But ultimately, they considered them a necessary compromise given the minimal pedagogical training teachers have previously received and their unfamiliarity with the new approach. School actors, however, did not share this concern, despite the fact that many of them did not closely follow the lesson plans. Many were in favor of the scripted guides, because they perceived them as reducing their workload by removing the previous curriculum's requirement to write their own lesson plans. These examples highlight the different perspectives between the school and reform visions. Reform staff place more value on creativity and independent thinking, and hence reluctantly produce resources that may limit these qualities in teachers or students. On the other hand, school actors' preference for a more authoritative pedagogical style can accommodate materials providing strict instruction, albeit in methods that do not reflect their own vision.

Despite their differences in visions of education and professional context, both school and the reform actors articulated concerns about the viability of the reform's pedagogical approach. Emphasizing the feeling shared by many school actors that material needs are more urgent than pedagogical changes, one school coordinator said, 'I think it's better we talk about quantity first, which doesn't mean we should forget quality. . . . But quality,' he cringed, 'not yet'. An international reform consultant mused on the feasibility of the reform's pedagogical approach, largely foreign to the social environment of its implementation:

The ideals of the [new] curriculum are so far removed from the reality on-the-ground in the classroom currently that there's absolutely no way that those ideals are going to be met in the short term . . . It is a shift not only in teaching but also in the way you view the world, and how do you change that? Can you change that? And do you want to change that?

## CONCLUSION

As I sat drinking coffee with one of the teachers on secondment to the reform team, I asked her how she thought the implementation of the Curriculum Reform was going. 'Mana [sister],' she said, 'the seeds of the reform have only just been planted. It will take time for us to see whether they grow'. All of my research participants agreed on the educational goals of improving quality and contributing to national development. However, reform and school actors place different emphases on the role of internationalization and localization in the Curriculum Reform, and they filter the reform policy through their different visions of education and diverse contexts. Consequently, at this early stage of implementation, their appropriations of the Curriculum Reform are greatly inconsistent. Ethnographic explorations of how education policy travels down the chain into teaching practice can complement policy processes and practitioner experience by broadening understandings of the ideological, material, political, and communicative contexts into which educational policy is introduced.

This research provides just one window into the complex national picture of education in Timor-Leste, and its limitations point to valuable areas for future research, including the reform's changing reception and implementation over time and in diverse parts of the country. What is clear is that bridging gaps between divergent visions of education and cultivating a multifaceted conception of context present significant challenges for the Curriculum Reform. As its implementation progresses and new initiatives<sup>4</sup> contribute to its rollout, time will tell whether the reform's seeds take root and flourish.

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<sup>4</sup> In early 2016, the Ministry of Education launched the multi-year Professional Learning and Mentoring Program in partnership with Australia to support the implementation of the Curriculum Reform through teacher training and mentoring throughout the country.

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