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Evaluating The Impact Of Restructuring Secondary Education In East Timor

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Abstract

The Timorese Government has embarked upon several approaches to empower national education, namely through the restructuring of the secondary education. Due to the lack of skilled professionals in education, East Timor has resorted to the support of international cooperation with institutions such as the University of Aveiro, in Portugal. In this paper, we present a starting project that aims at investigating how the new curriculum of secondary education in East Timor is being implemented, through its monitoring and short-term exploratory evaluation. At its core, this project seeks to provide constructive feedback both to the authors of the curriculum, as well as to Timorese stakeholders. Furthermore, this project constitutes a unique opportunity to closely follow, in the context of international cooperation, the process of the restructuring of an education system in a developing country, boosting the relationships between the researchers, the authors of the restructuring and the Timorese stakeholders.

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1. East Timor: contextual framework

After a period of violence, in 1999, East Timor, one of the world's newest nations, lost almost its entire qualified workforce in all sectors (Robinson, 2009), including education. After the independence, in 2002, there was a lack of teachers, and a large number was recruited on a voluntary basis. In 2007, the Timor-Leste Survey of Living Standards showed that 57% of the population remained uneducated to the primary level and only 14% of the

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Timorese had completed secondary education (SE). 75% of East Timor's teachers were not qualified to teach. Moreover, since independence, schools have continued to use an adapted version of the Indonesian curriculum (Heyward, 2005), which is inadequate to deal with the development needs of the country (DRET, 2011). Dropout and repetition rates are very high. The Timor-Leste Survey of Living Standards cites a number of contributing factors: lack of schoolbooks and learning materials, too few hours of teaching, poor teacher quality, high student-teacher ratios, poor physical infrastructure, high student and teacher absenteeism, and inadequate preparation for the language of instruction (Portuguese language).

The Timorese authorities consider education as a key factor to end poverty and achieve the Millennium Development Goals (MDG) (DRET, 2009), ensuring a better future for the country with the adequate training of human resources. Consistent with the MDG, one of the priorities of the National Education Strategic Plan is the reform of the education system aiming to improve the quality of education.

2. The urge of restructuring Secondary Education

The Strategic Development Plan (DRET, 2011) points out vital action areas in order to conduct the education reform, such as: (i) development of a new curriculum that focuses on promoting knowledge and higher-order skills and (ii) pedagogical and scientific qualification of teachers.

Presently, East Timor is dealing with the challenge of reforming the SE system. The wider goals of restructuring the SE are to contribute to socio-economic development and improvement of the country's human resource capacity.

The lack of qualified education staff led the Timorese rulers to strengthen ties of cooperation with international organizations of several countries, including Portugal. As part of the Portuguese cooperation policy, the University of Aveiro (UA) was appointed to provide adequate support to East Timor. UA has been playing a vital role in the international cooperation with East Timor, being responsible for the restructuring of the curriculum of Timorese SE and providing in-service training to Timorese teachers. The restructuring of SE involves the design and development of an original curriculum for East Timor, which reflects the social, religious and ethnic diversity of Timorese society. Didactic resources, for both teachers (teacher's guide) and students (textbook), support the innovative curriculum for each subject (14 in total) for the three years of SE. The implementation of the new curriculum is being gradually made.

Since the quality of teachers is one of the priorities for Timor-Leste's development ("Teachers are a Priority", 2013), and having in mind the vast number of unqualified secondary teachers (Albergaria Almeida, Martinho & Lopes, 2013), it is essential to ensure high quality teacher training (both scientific and pedagogical) in the implementation of the new curriculum. The UA is also responsible for selecting and providing training to a group of Portuguese teachers who will be trainers of a group of Timorese teachers. Later, these Timorese teachers will become trainers of other teachers. The UA is also accountable for providing training to Timorese teachers that move to Portugal for short periods of time to enhance their didactic and scientific skills.

3. The importance of monitoring and evaluation in the restructuring process

Restructuring the secondary school system of a developing country implies not only the planning and implementation of an innovative curriculum, but also the monitoring and evaluation of such a reform (Baker, 2000). However, the protocol established between the Government of East Timor and the international partner, Portugal, does not take into account these two processes (monitoring and evaluation).

Several authors (Baker, 2000; Horton & Mackay, 1999) state that monitoring and evaluation should be prioritized in cases like this one, *i.e.*, when the reform in question is launching a new approach that will expand, and when this reform could benefit from the results of an evaluation. According to Stufflebeam & Shinkfield (2007), monitoring and evaluation are processes of quality improvement, while Scheerens, Glas & Tomas (2003) and Stufflebeam (2008) add that these processes serve to emancipate and empower key stakeholders.

According to Baker (2000), in the literature a comprehensive evaluation embraces monitoring and impact evaluation. Monitoring will help to assess whether the restructuring of SE is being implemented as planned. Impact evaluation is proposed to determine more generally if the restructuring of SE is having the desired effects on teachers and students and on institutions.

The Council on Higher Education (2004) states that it is not easy to establish a boundary between monitoring and evaluation, “especially if the object of monitoring is not simply to produce data regularly but to produce intelligence on data” (p. 8) This is the case of our project, which aims at identifying and explaining emerging difficulties and tendencies that cannot be merely indicated but need some enlightenment. In this methodology approach, monitoring is a specific kind of formative evaluation. It depends on “routine management information in order to establish whether a programme is achieving its targets or outcomes, or what changes have occurred” (The Council on Higher Education (2004, p. 7). Thus, although there are two different phases in our project, we expect that their purposes will overlay in certain moments.

4. The TIMOR project

Since monitoring and evaluation were not contemplated in the protocol established between East Timor and Portugal, a group of educators of the UA proposed to conduct a project - the TIMOR project - to overcome this lack. In this project, we propose to perform monitoring and short-term impact evaluation of the implementation of the curriculum in the first two years, and provide feedback in order to assist the improvement of the restructuring of SE in East Timor in the subsequent years. It is particularly relevant to provide feedback to Timorese policy-makers and to the authors of the curriculum. This way, policy-makers will hold elements to critically judge the results of the implementation of the new curriculum, and the authors will be able to assist policy-makers, for instance, providing guidelines about teacher training and developing an implementation plan. Furthermore, we expect that the knowledge we will gain from monitoring and short-term evaluation will allow us to design a long-term evaluation plan to be implemented in the near future.

We intend to start the monitoring and evaluation processes about one year after the beginning of the official implementation of the new 10th grade curriculum in secondary schools. Our aim is to allow some time for the teachers and the students to get accommodated both to the new curriculum and to the new didactic materials. Textbooks will be available to 10th grade students and teachers by then. The teachers will also have access to the teacher’s guide. Moreover, at this stage, a group of 14 Portuguese teachers (1 for each subject) will be providing training to Timorese teachers in East Timor. This teacher education course includes training in both scientific and pedagogical fields. Since most Timorese teachers are not fluent in Portuguese language, the Portuguese trainers will also provide support in this field. Each Portuguese trainer will ensure teacher education to a group of 5 Timorese teachers, which will then become habilitated trainers of other Timorese teachers.

The early incorporation of monitoring and evaluation into the design of the restructuring will “make it possible to obtain results in a timely way so that the findings can be used for adjustments” (Baker, 2000, p. 43) at different stages of design to persistently enhance practice (Robinson, 2002). Actually, the focus of this project is to provide scientific, valid and reliable data, which will allow informing both the authors of the new curriculum and the Timorese policy-makers on the implementation of the restructuring process. It is essential that the restructuring process is closely followed during the first years, in order to allow analysis, reflection and enhancement of the implementation. Having access to research results on the implementation of the restructuring in the early years, the researchers and the authors of the new curriculum will be able to design and develop an implementation plan to optimize this process.

4.1. Purposes and aims

The main purposes of the TIMOR project are to: (1) monitor the implementation of the restructuring of the secondary education in East Timor; (2) evaluate the short-term impact of restructuring the curriculum of secondary education in East Timor, and (3) design a long-term impact evaluation plan on the restructuring of the curriculum of the secondary education in East Timor.

First of all, it is considered to be very important to understand the state of the art related to the history of the new born country, that contextualises the actual state of education in East Timor. In this phase it will also be conducted a literature review about evaluation research.

From this point on, this project is structured in two main phases: Phase I – Monitoring and Phase II – Evaluation. After an extensive and in-depth documentary analysis of relevant literature concerning also evaluation research, the research framework defined for both phases is mainly grounded on qualitative methodology, although the use of quantitative methods (inventories) in specific moments is also predicted. Baker (2000) stresses that qualitative methods (such as interviews, focus groups discussions, direct observation and documentary analysis) allow the deepening of the interpretation of results observed in quantitative methods (such as inventories), providing critical insights, revealing the value of reforms, and shedding light on the conditions and processes that may have affected outcomes. Furthermore, results and conclusions based on qualitative data are more intuitive, and usually stakeholders find them more manageable and appealing. For instance, in an evaluation study conducted on the school reform in Nicaragua, the ministry staff found qualitative data interesting and accessible, which in turn allowed a fast capability building and reliability for the evaluation process in the ministry (Rawlings, 2000).

4.2. Phase I - Monitoring phase

Considering the monitoring phase, the main aims are to 1) deeply describe, characterise and analyse the way the implementation of the restructuring of SE is taking place, having into account the voices of Timorese trainers, Portuguese trainers, Timorese teachers, students, school directors, intermediate government structures, policy makers, and 2) establish the role of structures, instruments, strategies and processes in the implementation process. More specifically we intend to:

- 1) describe how teacher training on the new curriculum is being implemented (both by Portuguese trainers and by Timorese trainers);
- 2) characterise the conditions under which the new secondary education curriculum is being implemented;
- 3) characterise the teaching, learning and assessment strategies adopted by Timorese teachers;
- 4) understand how the Timorese teachers are making use of the new curriculum and of the subject textbooks and the teacher's guides;
- 5) understand how the Timorese students are making use of the subject textbooks;
- 6) identify the main strengths/weaknesses that Timorese teachers/Timorese students find in this innovative curriculum.

During this phase, data will be collected through semi-structured interviews (Portuguese trainers and policy-makers), focus groups discussions (Timorese teachers and students), direct observation (classes), and inventories (Timorese students and teachers, and Portuguese trainers). Triangulation will be done between all data sources to validate findings.

4.3. Phase II - Short-term evaluation phase

The short-term exploratory evaluation phase aims to describe and analyse the state of SE in relation to the implementation of the transformation agenda, and to serve as a basis for the establishment of a long-term impact evaluation plan to be implemented during the complete cycle of studies. More specifically, we intend to:

- 1) identify and characterise changes in Timorese teachers' conceptions of teaching;
- 2) identify and characterise changes in Timorese teachers' practices;
- 3) characterise Timorese teachers' initial knowledge about the new curriculum of secondary education;
- 4) evaluate the short-term impact of the restructuring of the SE in East Timor in students' conceptions of learning and in their study habits;
- 5) understand the role that Timorese teachers attribute to pedagogical resources, such as the textbook and the teacher's guide;
- 6) understand how Timorese teachers use the teacher's guide to prepare teaching and learning strategies;
- 7) evaluate the initial impact of the restructuring of secondary education on the functioning of schools;
- 8) design and develop a long-term impact evaluation research plan.

In the evaluation phase, the methodology is maintained; nonetheless, other instruments (interviews and focus groups guides, and inventories) will be developed, validated and implemented. Data analysis will be performed from an eclectic point of view, making the best use of both qualitative and quantitative data.

5. Concluding remarks

This project aims to conduct an accurate monitoring and short-term impact evaluation of the restructuring of SE in East Timor, providing valuable feedback to stakeholders, aiming to enhance the implementation of this reform. In fact, the difficulties involved in changing the education systems in developing countries are immense (Jallade, Radi & Cuenin, 2001). Thus, the main results and conclusions of this project are extremely relevant to an international audience, providing knowledge, expertise and support to future restructurings of education systems. The results and conclusions obtained from this research study can be useful to other projects implemented in East Timor or in other developing countries.

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