Sharing teacher education in East Timor - Crossing the boundary and walking the walk

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Abstract

The opportunity to work in East Timor for a short time led to a steep learning curve for this writer who moved out of the comforts of an Australian institution into a world where a generator provided the only electricity. Teaching beginning teachers and teachers without any training in a new culture was a period of mutual learning. The relevance of teaching methods and management that is taken for granted in Australia does not appear to be great when confronted with classes without books, paper, pencils

This paper will examine the journey of planning, teaching and preparation for the next trip and the way in which conventional teaching is adapted to meet both the physical and cultural learning in a country that is rebuilding itself and trying to establish its independence. The question remains - can outsiders really contribute to the development of another country when the teaching and cultural contexts are so far removed from their own experience?

Background

There is an old Chinese proverb that says 'may you live in interesting times'. In 2002, one of the more interesting global events has been the granting of independence in East Timor. From May 20th 2002, East Timor has become the newest nation as well as the newest member of the United Nations. However the coming of age has meant that East Timor as a country has to develop its own governmental policies, establish infrastructures to ensure ease of government and more urgently, begin the task of rebuilding basic services such as health and education as well as finding ways of usefully employing those who were involved in military life before independence. At the time of writing there is increasing concern about the anger emerging from those who are frustrated at the slowness of change and the lack of prosperity that was imagined by those who see independence as an end, rather than the beginning of development in the country.

This paper will be confined to the development of education in the country, although there will be some overlap because of the strands of development impinge on each other. Following the vote for independence, the country was decimated by the local militia and the Indonesian military as they moved across the country back into West Timor. Infrastructure such as schools, hospitals, offices as well as private homes were destroyed, thousands were killed and the country was left with virtually nothing - it was if the whole country was a refugee camp. In a United Nations report to donor groups in Canberra, 2000, the following was stated:

Education should be seen as the key to East Timor's future. We should also be clear that the task of ensuring that the people of East Timor enjoy their right to education is a huge one. This is because of the history of neglect and oppression during the last century and the destruction of 90% of all facilities in September 1999. The task will take decades to complete. The maximum possible resources will be needed from national and international sources. All education stakeholders need to participate in decision-making in order to decide between competing claims for scarce resources and determine realistic time-frames for development. If this participation happens then it will be possible to achieve the social mobilisation necessary to achieve the right to education. Mobilisation will not be achieved without ownership by the people of East Timor.

The first development post August 1999 occurred when the United Nations embarked on an immediate intervention in education and revived the primary education system and brought routine back to the lives of communities. One of the first actions UNICEF took when
returning to East Timor was to help constitute education committees in all 13 districts. It was important that some order was re-established in the shattered communities, and these volunteer committees helped organise teachers and reopen schools, even without furniture, textbooks or a curriculum. UNICEF's role in providing basic teaching and learning materials, and in supplying a financial incentive to all primary school teachers, was crucial in getting more than 170,000 children into primary school by the end of the teaching year in June, 2000. Once this was done, the larger questions began to arise: how was a new infrastructure for teacher education and training to be established? Who would take on the role, given that the Indonesians had left taking with them the majority of those who had held middle and senior management positions in schools?

**Catholic Teachers College, Baucau**

An initiative of the Marist Brothers in Australia, the Catholic Teachers College in Baucau has been in formation since the end of 2000. To date, those involved have been concerned with building up positive relationships with the local teaching community, providing English lessons as well as specific professional development activities such as poster making for primary mathematics teachers. The project has been devised in such a way as to ensure that the targeted population, the education sector not only in Baucau but throughout East Timor, has been continuously part of the decision making process, in order to ensure that the specific needs of the community are being met. While the current director is Australian, the Assistant Director is East Timorese. He will take over as director when the Marist involvement finishes. Such a process will ensure that leadership will pass to those who have been trained to take on the role.

Australian Catholic University (ACU) became part of the project when members of academic staff were invited to become involved in some way with the formation of the College. My task was to provide classes for teachers and to work on committees associated with the opening of the college. Armed with a laptop and a data projector, I set off ready to present similar lectures to those I was already teaching in the undergraduate program at ACU.

On arrival, I advertised my course for experienced teachers by driving round 22 schools to hand out flyers each of the school principals. No telephone, no fax, no email - but a great opportunity to find out what schools were like and I learnt that I would have to modify my lectures in order to make them relevant to those who were to become my students. Each principal selected a senior teacher to attend the course. The group was wonderful. Very shy and quiet to begin with, once they felt confident enough there were discussion, questions and challenges about what I was teaching and even joking. I found out later that this was a very different learning environment to what they were used. Those who had been educated by the Indonesians were used to a 'type of top down management culture that has left people with little confidence to take decisions.' (UN Report, 2002).

The course was structured so that my original lectures were rewritten in a simpler format because English was not strong for any of the teachers. The lectures were then translated into Indonesian, since this was the language that the teachers were familiar. I then lectured in English with the aid of an interpreter who spoke in Tetum - the national language. There were some very interesting discussions at times, with three different languages being used in order to explain a new concept. However, it worked. The teachers then had to go back to their own schools, using the notes that they had received in class, and teach the rest of their staff the lectures they had had with me. The majority of teachers in schools are untrained, so this was professional development that was really needed.

The course included a lecture free day where the teachers had a practical session with staff in their schools. They then reported on any difficulties they had experienced before we had
the 'graduation ceremony', a simple ritual where the teachers received a certificate of completion that listed the topics we had covered during the course. I hope to teach another three units in this way so that the teachers will receive an International Certificate of Education accredited with ACU National. Hopefully, these teachers will be future principals as the school system develops.

**The Teachers' College**

Part of my work there was to assist in the formation of the Teachers' College, which was due to commence in October. However, because the necessary policies and programs were not in place, the opening semester will commence next October. Again, the lack of any previous infrastructure is very obvious. Teachers with training had received their education in Indonesia - there has never been a primary teacher training facility in East Timor. To build a college from nothing has been a huge undertaking. What makes it all the more difficult is that the two Catholic Bishops in East Timor and the management committee of the College want the intake to come from all thirteen districts in East Timor - and not every district has the same language or dialect! And to complicate matters further, the constitution of East Timor has named Portuguese as the national language - a language that is only spoken by those who were educated prior to the Indonesian invasion of 1975. This constraint has enormous implications for the time it takes to train teachers who can then teach children in schools yet another language. Portugal has responded to this need by sending many teachers of Portuguese, but it will take a long time before this issue is resolved. After all, it took the Indonesians about fifteen years to ensure Indonesian became the official teaching language after 1975. (United Nations Development Programme in East Timor, p. 48)

Issues for the College management committee has been finding buildings to use for administration, accommodation and resources as well as for lectures, restoring them to a usable condition, setting up enrolment policies, admission policies, finding lecturers to teach the program which remains in a constant state of change. At present there is accommodation for international teachers, an office for them to work, a separate administration office and a teachers' resource center that is developing into a tri-lingual library and computer center. In addition there is a 3 room building that is part of the local Catholic High School that is being refurbished for lecture rooms. Each building is totally separate from the others - the College is scattered through Baucau, distinguished by the fresh white paint and the College logo on the wall. Plans are under way to purchase some land in Baucau, but because there has been no land title office, and the fact that foreigners are not encouraged to buy land, negotiations are being carried out by the local staff on behalf of the Marist Brothers - and like everything else, it is taking a long time to come to any agreement. Meanwhile, the price of the land rises with every negotiating meeting!

Other organizational issues that need to be resolved prior to the opening of the student intake involves helping teachers in schools round Baucau to learn to become cooperating teachers during practicum experiences and to train people who are able to supervise from the College. At present these issues seem almost insurmountable, and yet, each month there is some development that keeps all of those involved energetic and committed to the task. Addressing these practical details will be part of my brief when I return to East Timor next year.

The primary course program itself changes with regularity as the management committee attempts to meet the outcomes for accreditation by ACU National. It is no mean feat to find lecturers in those subjects such as Visual Arts or Dance and Drama when there has been no history of such subjects taught in schools. There is constant communication between Baucau and Australia as the college attempts to find personnel to take up the task - only to find that the dates planned have been altered as the program is refined.
The lack of basic teaching resources is extreme, and future teachers will be trained to teach using resources that can be found locally - musical instruments made from recycled materials, science lessons devised round the local area, for example. In terms of Visual Arts, there is nothing at all, but a donor from Western Australia has promised to provide all necessary materials for the student teachers - though there is nothing yet for schools to use on a day to day basis.

Poverty is the most basic issue facing education in East Timor. In some schools children are fortunate if they have an exercise and one pencil to write with, and if it is planting or harvest time or there is water shortage, students will simply not go to school. In addition, as the UN Development Programme in East Timor Report observed:

There are fees involved in sending children to school as well and many parents do not have the financial means to do this. Since many parents did not go to school themselves, they may have little interest in education and do not encourage their children to attend school. Parents may also conclude that the quality of education is so low that their children achieve little by going to school and might just as well stay at home. (p. 50-51)

Such a reality is further exacerbated by the fact that teachers' wages are relatively very low - the housekeeper in the compound where I was living received the same wage as the primary school teachers. Thus teachers are often forced to take other employment to support their families, and so are frequently absent from school. The College would want a very different work ethic from those they are training, yet when the beginning teachers move out into schools, why should they be any different?

Reflections

Crossing the boundary of this culture and moving into a new one has been for me a wonderful experience. In moving out of my safe teaching and learning environment I have learnt so much - about teaching as well as about myself. But I am left with lots of questions that remain unresolved. I wonder about the effectiveness of foreign presence in East Timor - how can white, English speaking, western cultured people develop teachers who will be working in unthinkable conditions compared to what is taken for granted in universities in Australia? How can we be effective when the language of instruction is Portuguese? How can I train teachers when they will move into a culture that is based on rote learning and little, if any resources? If the teacher training programme is to be accredited, what about the need to meet the reality of the cultural and learning needs of this country that is the second poorest in the world?

I end on a positive note. I believe that if I let the almost overwhelming issues become the most important for me, I would unpack my laptop and data projector and stay in the security of the university. What I learnt from walking the walk with the East Timorese teachers was that because I was willing to share in the struggle to build their country, they were willing to accept what I was trying to do there - no matter if what I was teaching was not able to be transferred into the present everyday struggle of their lives. They have asked for computing skills for the next session I have with them, as well as more teaching and classroom management skills, and Portuguese lessons. Other teachers from Australia who have gone to Baucau have been giving three day professional development courses in areas such as making charts and posters. So together we are making a difference and I conclude with the recommendation from the United Nations report:

The basic subjects and contents of the curriculum will need to be arrived at through extensive consultations between teachers, parents and children. But this is also an area where international experience and resources can make an important
contribution - helping those charged with developing a new curriculum for East Timor to learn from teaching practices elsewhere and attain internationally accepted standards. (2002, p. 53)

BIBLIOGRAPHY
