Education Reconstruction in East Timor: The Case of a Transitional Society.

Jaya Earnest (Ph.D)
Research Unit for the Study of Societies in Change
Curtin University of Technology
Western Australia
J.Earnest@exchange.curtin.edu.au

Abstract
The conclusion of the electoral process in April 2002, paved the way for the declaration of independence of East Timor on 20 May 2002, making the tiny nation the world’s newest democracy. The purpose of this study is to describe and analyse information on the education reconstruction process, and to make some recommendations about how to better promote a contextually relevant education in this fledgling democracy. This three-phase longitudinal study carried out over two years, is an enquiry into a transitional state struggling with multiple social, political, economic and educational constraints. The research used an interpretive case study approach within a qualitative framework. Multiple methods, sensitive to the context included in-depth interviews, focus group interviews, school visits, accumulation of documentary data and reflective narratives.

The Aims of this Study are:

• To obtain a broad overview of the state of the current primary and junior secondary education system from the perspective of educators, teachers and students in East Timor

• To identify the professional development needs of science teachers at the primary and lower secondary level in East Timor

• To propose a model of school improvement that has been tried and tested in 3 other transitional societies that links improvement in school leadership and on-going teacher professional development within the school to bring about effective school change.

The Research Study:

• The experience and expertise of the researcher, who has lived, worked and carried out studies in the developing world and transitional societies; viz: India, Kenya, Uganda, Rwanda, and Kosovo.

• The study is one of the few studies in a transitional society that has considered the views of local teachers, students and education personnel.

Background to the Study:
An Historical Overview of the Road to Independence:
In 1975, following Portuguese rule the Indonesian Army supported by local militia invaded East Timor and annexed it. By 1999, an estimated 200,000 East Timorese—a quarter of the population were either killed or starved to death. Indonesia’s rule lasted 24 years and during that time a strong pro-Jakarta militia formed as well as an armed independence movement called Fretlin. Fretlin stayed mainly in the mountains where they organised educational classes, provided health care and tilled the land along with organizing the nation for freedom (UNDP,2002).
The Referendum and the Electoral Process
In August 1999, East Timor held a referendum on independence. With an overwhelming voter turnout, the East Timorese chose independence. The announcement of the results sparked an explosion of systematic violence and killings that lasted until the UN peacekeeping forces arrived in late September. In 21 days nearly the entire population was uprooted and displaced. Some 90% of public buildings and infrastructure in East Timor were systematically destroyed. The conclusion of the electoral process, on 17th April 2002 paved the way for East Timor’s independence on 20th May 2002, as the world’s newest democracy (AUSAID, 2001).

Education Reconstruction in East Timor
A school mapping exercise began in April 2001 to examine each school’s physical condition, the facilities available; the area served by each facility, the projected student population and the student retention rates. More than 700 primary, 100 junior secondary, 40 pre-schools and 10 technical colleges are currently functioning in the country. Of these 535 schools and more than 2780 classrooms, have been rehabilitated to basic operational level under the Transitional Administration’s Emergency School Readiness Project. Investment in technical and vocational training for older students is another fundamental priority of the educational administration (UNICEF, 2001).

Teacher Professional Development
In October 2001 the Division of Education launched a double track initiative to train teachers. Those who did not possess a degree were trained toward that level at the National University, whilst teachers all over the country are receiving a fast track in-service training. At present teaching is under an Indonesian Curriculum until a new East Timorese based course of study can be determined (UNDP, 2002).

Language
After Independence the new government has directed that Portuguese is the new national and official language and all the education has to be taught in that language. Educators already struggle with a mixture of the local oral language Tetum, curriculum in Indonesian and the hunger to learn English. Most of the students and teachers in schools do not speak Portuguese themselves and do not have the capacity to teach their students in that language (AUSAID, 2002).

The Research Approach and Data Collection

A Case Study Approach
In the context of East Timor, the study is an enquiry into a complex transitional society that is fledging state and struggling with multiple social, political, economic and educational constraints. The research used a case study approach using multiple methods within a qualitative framework that used interpretive and critical ethnographic analysis (Denzin & Lincoln, 2000). The qualitative approach was more sensitive to the context and included in-depth interviews, focus group interviews, and school visits, accumulation of documentary data and reflective narratives that took into account social action that was locally distinct (Punch, 1998, Erickson, 1998).

Data Collection
Data was collected over a period of 3 weeks each in two phases in April and November 2003, in two districts of East Timor: Dili and Baucau from:

- Education personnel, who were interviewed to give a broad overview of the education reconstruction process.
- 8 lower secondary teachers in a focus group interview, in the area of biology, physics, mathematics, history and geography.
- 8 primary teachers in a focus group interview, teachers were asked in-depth questions about science teaching and issues related to health, hygiene, water,
sanitation and environment. They were asked questions about textbooks, materials and language of instruction.

- In-depth interviews with 2 head teachers, of these 2 were from Baucau. The 2 head teachers had been involved in teaching for a period of 4 to 20 years.
- School visits of schools in Dili and in Baucau. I visited these schools on 2 occasions each.
- Visit to a rural village to meet with a 90 year old village elder and his family obtain impressions of ancestral land and cultural beliefs.
- Working in the classroom with students and teachers in a secondary school teaching Biology and English.
- Non-participant observation of 2 professional development programmes that were held in Dili by Plan International and a Catholic Teacher Training College.
- A focus group discussion with 8, Year 9 students from a junior secondary school at a beach with lunch at a local roadside restaurant.
- Documentary data collected from international and national organisations.
- Met with and had brief discussions with 2 lecturers from the Department of Education of the National University of East Timor.
- Brief interviews with 2 expatriate doctors working with the Ministry of health.
- 1 local Timorese professional who was involved with the resistance movement who provided a political perspective and its impact on education on Timorese students.

Data Analysis and Discussion

Mountains in the mist
During the two phases of data collection, I made the trips between Dili and Baucau, several times and the magnificent beauty of the mountains and the sheer drop to the sea enthralled me. While driving back from Dili on a late Saturday afternoon the clouds hung low over the mountains, some of these mountains are considered sacred as the resistance took place in the mountains and filtered into the towns and villages. I saw 14 white crosses on the hillsides representing the 14 Stations of the Cross and the small shrine of St. Anthony at a bend on the road, both these symbols a testimony to the devotion and piety of the people. My journey to meet the village elder was a 45-minute walk through the mountains with the sea on one side, the village elder pointed to an expanse of land on the mountains and declared that this was sacred ancestral land.

A Flavour of the Country
The local bus from Dili to Baucau was also used as a local postal service and on my journeys; I found that it delivered some packages, letters and even a bicycle part to different villages. I saw buffalo in the paddy fields used as ploughs, mountain goats and chicken scurry across the road before the bus could hit them. Farmers with their families knee deep in the paddy fields transplanting rice. As we drove along the countryside there were bundles of wood from the palm tree, the local villagers use this wood for building their homes.

I was intrigued by the fact that the East Timorese were a mixture of races and they had a mixture of the Portuguese, Malays, Islanders, Polynesian and Asians in them. Most of the East Timorese lead simple lives but life in the villages is also very difficult and most Timorese are very poor. As the people have a close relationship with the land, they have big families with many children to till the land and look after it. Malnourishment and respiratory diseases, along with malaria and dengue fever are rampant in the countryside. Inspite of all their hardships the Timorese are a simple and patient people with tremendous hope that the independence they have now achieved will provide them better opportunities for the future.
A glimpse of schools in East Timor

On both my visits to East Timor, I visited several schools. The Catholic Secondary school had excellent infrastructure and the government school had recently been renovated and repaired. Many of the schools in the villages have still not been renovated after the devastation and destruction of 1999, some do not have roofs, insufficient furniture and most of them lack resources. Classroom scenarios depicted traditional classrooms with the teacher imparting knowledge often not from a book, but from their own knowledge and experiences. The students were wonderful, warm and happy and the junior secondary students were open to ideas, suggestions and freely expressed their opinion. The Timorese themselves are running their schools and are aware of their limitations, but continue to hope that things will improve for their schools, teachers and students.

Analysis of interviews (Voices of teachers, students and administrators)

In this section I have provided a brief analysis of the interviews that I held with teachers, students and education personnel. I have included translations of original quotes but have not included names so as to maintain confidentiality and anonymity of the teachers. The interview analysis identified several constraints that have been listed under the headings given below:

Textbooks

All of the teachers that I interviewed talked about the acute shortage of books and textbooks, currently they use textbooks but these are Indonesian textbooks, there are not enough textbooks to teach and all the students do not have textbooks, so students have to rely on copying notes from the board. Most of the books did not focus on East Timor, and were not relevant to the East Timor context.

I teach history but the Indonesian books that I am still using do not have any history of East Timor. We need our oral history documented. I would also like a basic knowledge of the world (history teacher at a junior secondary school).

At the beginning of this academic year we were given textbooks from Portugal for most subjects. We use some of these books but most of the books are kept in the principal’s office. We also do not speak Portuguese at the level where we can teach it to the students (primary teacher in a local government school).

Upgrading qualifications

The teachers spoke of their desire to improve and upgrade their qualifications. All teachers wanted to have professional development courses and learn more about new and modern teaching methods.

I talk on behalf of the teachers in this school. We would like you to come and work in the school and the classroom with the teachers, but please understand that our methods are very basic and if the professional development is too high then it may be difficult for us. We would like you to work in the classrooms with us (a senior teacher at a government school in Baucau).

After the referendum and the violence of the next 3 weeks during September 1999, all the secondary Indonesian teachers left the country, now most of the secondary teachers are university students who have not finished their course, they have poor content knowledge and have not been trained in pedagogy, methodology and planning (headmaster of a catholic junior secondary school).
The issue of Language
Most of the young teachers did not speak Portuguese; they spoke Bahasa and a local dialect Tetum. Only a few of the older teacher spoke Portuguese. The government had made Portuguese, the national language and in most schools there were teachers from Portugal that were teaching the students and East Timorese teachers Portuguese. The issue of language is a big problem in the country, where most of the young people do not speak Portuguese but Bahasa, only the older elite and the Diaspora who returned from Portugal, Mozambique and Angola speak the language. The teachers in primary and junior secondary are given limited lessons per week to learn the language but are not enthusiastic about the process. All the teachers I spoke to expressed this dilemma concerning language.

There is currently confusion about languages. We have textbooks in Indonesian but the level of Indonesian known by the students is not good so sometimes we have to explain in Tetum. All of us young teachers in the school do not speak Portuguese and we also not interested to learn the language (teachers at a junior secondary school).

I hope the Portuguese teachers who have come from Portugal and are sponsored by the government of Portugal will stay for a long time at least 10-12 years. They must stay longer than this honeymoon stage, only then will our children achieve a level of proficiency (an experienced educator).

Practical Science and the Use of Laboratories
Most teachers in primary schools and science teachers in secondary schools in East Timor have never done any laboratory work and do not do demonstrations. Many of them have never been given any training in practical activities. They recognised openly their lack of skills and pedagogical knowledge in this area. Teachers asked for support material for teaching science. They also expressed concern that the provision of laboratory equipment would not change their style of teaching because of existing factors: large classes, lessons times, lack of physical space in schools and a lack of in service training.

Infrastructure and Resources
As in many low developing countries and transitional societies, the harsh reality of the situation is that most schools function with barely minimal resources, some districts in the country are poorer than others and have no roofs, desks and chairs and most schools do not have access to electricity, water and the sanitation facilities are extremely poor. Many principals and administrators struggle with the multiple responsibilities of trying to find the funds to not only run the schools but also to pay teachers salaries.

I need US$ 300 more to pay all my teachers this month, I am not sure where I will get the money from. I have not been paid for a few months but I do not mind. I hope the situation will change for the better soon (the headmaster of a junior secondary school).

After the war we had no material and books many of the schools had been burnt down. Although we have received many donations, many of these are higher level books especially English books. Many schools received blackboards but we have no money to buy chalk or dusters (a primary school teacher).

Students’ Views on Traditional Beliefs, HIV/AIDS
In schools in East Timor, students are passive learners with the teacher the giver of knowledge and students copiously copied noted from the board. I had the unique opportunity to teach several Biology and English lessons in a year 9 class of 48 students in a catholic
junior secondary school, the principal of the school was multi-lingual and was keen to see a different approach used with limited resources.

8 students accompanied me to a beach for a picnic lunch and a focus group interview on issues of traditional beliefs, their environment, drugs, HIV/AIDS. The principal of the school accompanied us and acted as the translator. I had asked his permission to discuss the issues listed above as I did not want to upset cross-cultural sensitivities.

It was an excellent discussion by the sea and at a roadside cafe where we had a delicious lunch of rice steamed in palm pouches and fish. The students expressed their views spontaneously and the quotes given below provide an insight into their own knowledge and world views:

Some views on Conservation/Soil Erosion

My uncle lost all his rice fields due to floods and heavy rain. When my father and I went to see him, my father tried to explain that the flooding was due to soil erosion caused by the cutting of trees.

In East Timor there is a high level of unemployment, so people cut trees so that they can sell the wood and get money to survive. We know that it can cause soil erosion and even floods but the people are so poor.

Views on Drugs and Alcoholism

Drugs are only in the big city of Dili and they are sold openly only near some discos.

Many people are addicted to the local brew and take it to relieve stress mostly it is the men and not women.

Most of the women especially in the villages chew the betelnut/leaf and if they stop eating this then it causes them pain in the chest and stomach.

Views on HIV/AIDS

We all know about AIDS and have heard about it. Mostly in Dili people go and see pornographic material and visit the bars and prostitutes and can get AIDS.

We are not taught in schools that you can get AIDS from blood transfusions, using infected needles and that it can be passed from mother to baby.

Views about Witchcraft and Magic

I have personally experienced witchcraft, I refused to give something to some people and they came in the night in the form of spirits, they came to embrace me and I was aware of them, I could see the person but I was too scared.

Once on an excursion, students were sitting and playing with some stones, but one of the stone had an evil spirit and this caused the student to have an accident and he died.
The discussion provided insights into the students’ views on traditional and cultural aspects of their lives.

**Views of local education personnel**
Taking to a broad range of people gave a unique perspective to my study.

- I was fortunate to meet and talk to people who had lived in East Timor for 50 years so they had the perspective of the Portuguese times, the Indonesian times and the current times.
- I was fortunate to meet a young multilingual local Timorese man who was involved with the resistance and had lost family during Indonesian occupation.
- I was fortunate to talk to the superintendent of the District Education office in Baucau, who spoke of his vision and plans even though he had innumerable difficulties and lacked resources.

*The Indonesians built a lot of infrastructure, carried out development of roads, schools and health centres for the purpose of integration. Due to establishment of many schools, many more students graduated from senior high school compared to when the Portuguese were here. The Indonesians did not manage to win the heart of the Timorese people. Education gives rise to social, racial and political feelings and this works for resistance.*

*The period from 1984-1994, was one of political tensions. Ordinary people were caught in the middle. Many young Timorese both male and female were arrested. You were also not allowed to speak Portuguese. In November 1992, there was a massacre of Timorese students especially those who had pro-independence inclinations but the resistance continued.*

*The Timorese have become poorer after independence. Candlenut, coffee, coconuts were all exported to Indonesia and this export has now stopped. Inflation has increased and the change of currency to the US dollar has meant that the people have to pay more for everything. For some of the services the price has increased 10 times.*

The quotes provided above portray the reality of life for the common people in East Timor and the day-to-day difficulties they face. The quotes also brought to light that teachers’ and students’ knowledge and experiences had an impact on the education reconstruction process.

**Recommendations from the study:**
It must be acknowledged that East Timorese teachers, educators and students at all levels are motivated and enthusiastic. They live and work in difficult conditions, have limited pedagogical knowledge and training, especially but try to do their best under difficult circumstances. The challenge lies in the Ministry of Education’s ability to respond to these constraints.

**Recommendation 1:** Resolve the dilemma of national language
It is important for the government to devise a strategy to put a mechanism in place so that teachers can teach in Portuguese. Most teachers in the country lack the competency in reading, writing and speaking to effectively teach the language to the students. Currently schools are still teaching in Bahasa and Tetum or in both the languages.

**Recommendation 2:** Improve the quality of teachers and provide better remuneration
There is no doubt that teachers form the backbone of an effective education system. The Ministry of Education will have to put in place a plan of action so that teachers not only have professional development sessions but also work towards certification and this can be ongoing during the course of the academic year or intensive during the holidays. The challenge lies in re-organising teacher training structures and the creation of a higher pedagogical institute and improving remuneration.

**Recommendation 3: Provide a contextually relevant curriculum**

The curriculum especially subjects like science, history, geography need to be relevant to the East Timor context otherwise the curriculum will be an adaptation of a foreign curriculum and may not have local contextual relevance. East Timor needs to develop a curriculum that is authentic, contextually relevant and affordable.

**Recommendation 4: Propose a model for School Improvement through improved Leadership and on-going Teacher Professional Development.**

Effective school change and school improvement does not take place in a short period of time, it is an on-going process that is achieved over a period of time and takes place only when on-going teacher development is carried out during the course of the entire academic year, along with leadership training for school administrators or principals.

**Conclusion**

There are no easy answers to the overwhelming problems facing education reconstruction in East Timor but meeting and talking to the teachers and students have given me another lesson in resilience, endurance, hope and that people in transitional societies want to succeed against all odds.

**References**


**Acknowledgements**

This research has been made possible from seed funding from the Research Unit for the Study of Societies in Change (RUSSIC) and Division of Health Sciences, Curtin University of Technology, Western Australia.

I would like to thank the Director and Staff of the Catholic Teachers Institute, Baucua, East Timor for their support, assistance and friendship during my research.