Mind the Gap: The dissonance between the theory, policy and practice of learner-centredness in Timor-Leste

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ABSTRACT

Increasingly, the imperative of schooling experiences for students that promote "democratic values" are seen as critical in post-conflict and/or fragile states such as Timor-Leste, if for nothing else than to promote a fundamental level of social cohesion (i.e. learning to live together). Unfortunately, mechanisms to achieve such objectives are often defined, measured and assessed by external actors and/or a small political elite and lack appropriate consideration of the context of implementation. Learner-centred pedagogy (LCP) is one such idea that has been heavily promoted by international agencies such as UNICEF and numerous INGOs in contexts where teachers, communities and policy-makers may have very different capacities and understandings of the concept. Thus underneath this apparent "global isomorphism" of schooling practices are complexities, contradictions, and local interpretations of learner-centeredness, rendering educational policy transfer problematic at best, and wholly insufficient at worst. This paper explores this concept in the context of Timor-Leste through: (1) a critical analysis of donor documentation and national policy documents on the topic; and (2) local understandings/conceptions/contestations of LCP through the authors' own empirical work.

INTRODUCTION

In 2002, Timor-Leste (East Timor) gained its formal independence following centuries of colonial rule by Portugal, more than two decades of illegal occupation by Indonesia, and three years of transitional governance led by the United Nations. The fragile peace and budding legitimacy of early political leadership that was established during the transition to independence was predicated on societal expectations that education would serve a key restorative and transformative role in the country's future. As a series of government policies and laws would later express, the key objective of a postcolonial education system was to allow future citizens to know how to know, to be, to think, and to live together, with strong undertones to UNESCO's *Delors Report* (MECYS, 2004; RDTL, 2008, 2011; UNESCO, 1996). To accomplish this, reforms to the largely Indonesian era curriculum in place at the time commenced in 2004 and continue to today. Such reform has made dramatic alterations to the content of what was to be taught, the language(s) it was to be taught in, and the methods by which teaching would be delivered. It is this last point that is the focus of our paper, namely the politics, policies and practices surrounding a shift to learner-centred pedagogy (LCP) in the context of a newly independent and still fragile state.

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In interrogating the prevalence of LCP within the wider discourse of educational reform and in the case of Timor-Leste specifically, the discussion will adapt Dale's (2006, p. 190) framework for investigating the politics of education and educational politics[2]. The remainder of our article explores educational practice, policy and discourse related to LCP by asking:

(1) *Under whose interests was LCP promoted in Timor-Leste?;*
(2) *By whom and at what scale was this shift in pedagogy determined, coordinated, and implemented?;* and
(3) *What circumstances was LCP implemented under and with what results?*

A key assertion is that whilst LCP was premised on its symbolic image as a form of teaching that was more inclusive, democratic and relevant to the needs of all Timorese children, the interpretations and implementation of LCP from policy discourse through to practice belies such priorities. Instead, what has resulted in Timor-Leste is what Jansen (2002) labels as political symbolism as policy craft where policy statements and messages are used as a tool for legitimating and symbolising change without any substantive intent or capacity for reform. This has deleterious impacts on the quality of schooling and the broader pedagogical values that underpin LCP, as later sections will detail.

This paper takes into account the effect of colonisation/occupation/neocolonialism on education. These are periods in which unequal power relationships are legitimated through statements, texts and knowledges promoted in schooling. These constructions become a conduit through which the identities of both students and teachers can often be (re)bordered and (re)shaped to meet certain interests (Borg & Mayo, 2007; Koh, 2004; Tickly, 2004; Tiffin, 2004). Schools become sites that promote "… a system of knowledge and representation which deeply affect[ed] the identity formation of the colonizer and the colonized" (Hickling-Hudson, 2010, p. 300). This discussion will locate the case of Timor-Leste within such a framework.

RESEARCH APPROACH

The data presented in this paper is extracted from our research into classroom practice since 2005 when the curriculum reforms began, and the impact these changes have had on the perceptions and practices of primary teachers throughout the country. For this paper, relevant data from documentary evidence, interviews with school-level actors, observations of teacher training sessions, and descriptions of teacher practice gained from a series of classroom observations are presented. All research was conducted in confidence. For this reason focus group and individual

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[2] Dale (1994) distinguishes between the two as follows. The politics of education are the processes and structures through which an agenda for education reform is created. Educational politics are the process in which such a reform agenda is translated into specific problems, issues and policies for schools and the way in which schools respond to these issues. He suggests that most educational policy research tends to focus on the latter rather than the former, despite the fact that much of what goes on in education is traceable and linked to the broader political and cultural economy of society.

interview data have been assigned codes based on the school[3] and type of interview[4] conducted.

LEARNER CENTERED PEDAGOGY AS A TRAVELLING OR MUTATING GLOBAL DISCOURSE?

LCP has become well established in the practices of classrooms in the Global North, and come to enjoy an almost hegemonic position in terms of what is seen as justifiable or appropriate teaching in such contexts (Carney, 2008). LCP comes from a pedagogical discourse that has developed over many years with its beginnings based on the socio-constructivist theories of knowledge acquisition. Founded on the notion that knowledge is co-constructed between learner and teacher, and through the reconciliation of prior knowledge with new experience, social interaction and active engagement in the learning process are important attributes of this theory of learning (Dockett & Perry, 1996). It shifts pedagogy towards a competence-orientation which is much more loosely framed and classified[5] under the belief that the learner "active and creative in the construction of a valid world of meanings and practice" (Bernstein, 2000, p. 43). Due to the weaker framing and classification of instructional and regulative discourses, boundaries between subjects are weak and learning activities may be interdisciplinary in nature, while time and space are more loosely structured inside classrooms. Similarly, interpersonal communication between teachers and learners is emphasised, diffusing the hierarchical systems of control regulating classroom interaction and leading to more invisible and implicit rules. Evaluation practices are geared towards acknowledging what students know, rather than what they do not, and the criteria for evaluating students are not explicit.

What is often ignored in implementing LCP is that such pedagogy requires heavy investment in terms of material resources, teacher training and the time demands of teachers, as greater responsibility is handed over to the teacher to craft instructional resources, evaluate students, and facilitate project-based activities. In terms of classroom organisation and practices, common characteristics are students participating in group work with a physical arrangement of the classroom that allows for this (i.e. desks organised in clusters/pods); greater amounts of student talk and questioning both between pupils and between teachers and students; teachers engaging in individual or group-based instruction over whole-class lecture; and opportunities for student choice in learning activities. Thus, a teacher must have

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[3] Each primary/elementary school (*Escola Primaria*) visited has been given a four-letter code beginning EP.

[4] All codes are denoted by the prefix FG (Focus groups), SD (School Directors) or KI (Key Informants).

[5] Classification determines the types of boundaries that are drawn between categories, agents, actors or discourses in a pedagogical relationship, while framing relates to the locus of control over the selection, sequencing and pacing of instructional discourse. Strong classification produces clear divisions of responsibility and clear demarcations of knowledge between and within subject discourses. Weak classification, conversely, is typified by the blurring of subject disciplines, with an emphasis instead on learning dispositions and the application of knowledge to outside contexts. Strong framing locates control of the learning process with the transmitter of knowledge, while weaker framing locates control more with the learner (Bernstein, 2000, 2004)

high degrees of content knowledge and pedagogical knowledge in order to bring the flexibility and planning to bear of this type of classroom orientation.

Despite these prerequisites, development partners heavily promote LCP as a panacea for addressing the intractable issues of educational quality and relevance in post-colonial and post-conflict settings[6] (Anderson-Levitt, 2003; Chisholm & Leyendecker, 2008). Promoted as an example of 'international best practice'[7] it is increasingly part of a perceived isomorphism of pedagogy in classrooms globally (c.f. Meyer, 1977; Ramirez & Boli, 1987). Tabulawa (2003, p. 9) contends that while LCP is often promoted as a "value-free" example of best practice, such action diffuses a particular "view of the world, about the kind of people and society we want to create through education." Underlying it are discourses of democratisation, individual autonomy, and tolerance, which are seen as 'necessary' for individuals to co-exist in pluralistic, liberal, democratic and market-based societies. Some writers have gone as far as to argue that LCP is a prime example of new forms of imperialism or neo-colonialism where foreign ideals are imposed through educational policymaking (Tikly, 2004). Nonetheless, LCP in many developing world contexts remains "incautiously blundered into as ostensibly unproblematic", resulting in it "acquir[ing] the status of unarguable pedagogical truth and becom[ing] transmuted into policy" (Alexander, 2008, pp. 1-2).

However, this does not mean that LCP is understood and enacted in similar ways throughout the Global South. Instead, what occurs in many contexts is a process of policy borrowing, where symbolic elements of policy are appropriated, sometimes without the material elements that coincide with such ideas (Steiner-Khamsi, 2004). Often this comes about in times of rapid social, economic or political change, where the internal reference points to school traditions, beliefs and modes of organisation fail. The hegemonic order is disrupted, and policymakers look to the outside for symbols of change from other educational systems, which better resonate with the broader vision of a 'new society', whatever that may be. Often these symbols are alien to the internal cultures and practices of schooling, and are highly contested. Policies such as LCP are borrowed strategically to help legitimate a new constellation of political, social and economic order (Schriewer, 2000).

For example, in the case of reforms to pedagogy in South Africa after the end of apartheid, Jansen (2000) advances the assertion that what occurred was the symbolic production of policy focussed on signalling a discursive shift from the past in what he has labelled *political symbolism as policy craft*. At that particular moment in the country's history, he argues that political elites (and external actors) used policy production to lend credence to South Africa's new socio-political paradigm

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[6] This can be traced back to Beeby's (1966) early classification of education systems across the developing world in which he identified a clear trajectory of 'progress' from those founded on rote-learning to those which were based on teaching for meaning/understanding. This "teleological purpose of westernization disguised as 'better teaching'" has tended to polarise teacher-centred practices as antiquated in comparison to learner-centred practices that are deemed modern or western in nature (Guthrie, 1980, p. 421).

[7] This was the case for Timor-Leste where, according to UNICEF (2007, p. 43) documentation, the focus on child-centred and active learning was legitimated as "worldwide best practice".

and to demonstrate visible, albeit symbolic levers of change that were reflective of this. Less political will existed for actual implementation of such policies, due to ongoing macro-economic, political, social and material conditions and tensions. Conditions which typified this were: (1) a proliferation of new policy statements in quick succession; (2) a lack of policy coherence across various policy statements; (3) the invocation of international precedent and participants in the development of various education policies; (4) the adoption of discourses that were intimately and directly linked to current developments elsewhere in the international environment (i.e. citing major international trends and issues in policy), and (5) preoccupation with inclusiveness in the policy-making process rather than its implementation and outcomes. Many of these issues can also be found in Timor-Leste in terms of curriculum reform. For example, discussion of language(s) of instruction in the classroom has disproportionately attracted debate instead of more holistic issues of what will be taught and how across schooling as a whole {Quinn, 2007 #142;Quinn, 2012 #611}.

In other parts of the Global South, it has been contended that the adoption of policies such as LCP is part of the polity's commitment to institutional forms and socialisation processes equated with the west in an attempt to appear "modern" (Fuller, 1991). For post-colonial countries or those in transition to liberal democracy, Nykiel-Herbert (2004) advances the argument that this pedagogy has become a preferred choice by policymakers as it helps to reinforce the symbolic promise of intellectual liberation that distinguishes it from traditional approaches that could be seen as colonising or oppressive. Hoppers (1996) adds that learner-centeredness is often associated with reinforcing competencies, knowledge and skills such as problem solving, teamwork, and critical thought, which are seen as essential for participation in the '21st century knowledge economy'. Given the place, space and time at which LCP was advanced in the Timorese reform agendas, the notion that LCP served a strategic and symbolic role is critical to understanding the dissonance between discourse and practice.

TIMOR-LESTE'S COLONIAL PAST AND LCP'S POSITIONING IN ITS FUTURE

The colonial education system of Timor-Leste, similar to many other former colonised spaces, was created to legitimate outside occupation through the systemic repression of indigenous epistemologies, and the imposition of external perspectives, images, symbols and modes of production (Quijano, 2007; Walsh, 2007). Throughout the nearly 500 years of Portuguese colonial rule, mass education was the exception rather than the rule, and beyond Portuguese nationals only the children of local *liturais* (chiefs) were granted any access to schooling (Boughton, 2011). The aim was to educate them as a small administrative class, who could effectively manage the colony in Portugal's "best interest" (Hill, 2002; Millo & Barnett, 2004; World Bank, 2004). The schools that these children attended instilled ideas that Timorese culture and history were closer to those of other Portuguese colonies in Africa than to cultures and histories of its Asian neighbours. The curriculum neglected any discussion of pre-colonial Timorese culture, history and language and the purposeful,

systemic creation of belonging to the Portuguese diaspora[8] rather than an indigenous community, contributing to what Walsh (2007) has labelled a "geopolitics of knowledge." Intellectual and cultural formation of the Timorese elite became intimately connected to Portuguese language, culture and historiography.[9] Colonial scholarship for over 500 years embodied this epistemology, and written archives of the past have become framed around these colonial constructs. With the push to reclaim Timorese historiography, identity and knowledge, academics, scholars and educators are faced with discovering an "indigenous" identity using a 500 year corpus of work which is itself the product of colonial and imperial design (Gunn, 1999).

While the 24 subsequent years of Indonesian occupation between 1975 and 1999 greatly increased opportunities for all Timorese children to participate in a programme of basic education with 90% of children enrolled in school by 1990 (Beazley, 1999), the expressed aim of the schooling system was to promote *pancasila*, an ideology based on a singular Indonesia with a shared history, set of values and beliefs, despite the marked diversity within the archipelago (Cribb, 1997). Schooling under tightly regulated and centralised Indonesian control was a mechanism to "forge nationalistic loyalties and identities over ethnic, religious and class divisions" (Kipp, 1993, p. 77), assimilating future generations into Indonesian society and discount the existence of a distinct Timorese identity. Essentially, the Indonesian-prescribed curriculum "serv[ed] the purpose of control" (Nicolai, 2004, p. 44). Described another way, Indonesian schooling according to the Commission for Reception, Reconciliation and Truth (CAVR), "was used…as a part of an integrated security approach whose overriding objective was to ensure that pro-independence sentiment did not take root in a new generation" (2006, quoted in Boughton, 2011).

In 1999, a successful referendum for independence from Indonesia, followed by widespread violence and destruction by the former occupiers as they left the country, led to a UN Transitional Government taking over responsibility for the state. The country's ascendency onto the world stage occurred during a period of active and growing interventionism in the affairs of fragile/conflict-affected states in what some have identified as neo-colonialism disguised under state-building agendas (Novelli, 2010). As part of this, the melding of securitisation, diplomacy and development agendas has placed education as a key institution for "winning the hearts and minds" of citizens following regime change (Robertson et al., 2007).[10] The result is that conflict affected and/or fragile states often face both internal and external pressure to reform education provision as a way of brokering a 'peace dividend' between the state and its citizens. Central to this is the belief that changes in educational quality, relevance, governance and organisation are fundamental to brokering this legitimacy as recent scholarship makes it clear that it is a *particular*

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[8] This group of education elite would later be given the title of the *assimilados* (assimilated) suggesting their complete acculturation into Portuguese values, ideals and values.

[9] This is typified by Nobel-Laureate Jose Ramos-Horta, who served as both prime minister and president in various governments between 2002-2012.

[10] This sentiment on education's purpose for fighting counterinsurgency and promoting security has been seen firsthand in places like Afghanistan and Iraq where political leaders from the UK and the US have made clear statements to this effect (see Novelli, 2010).

type of institution of schooling that has the potential to promote longer-term stability and peace (Bakarat, Karpinska, & Paulson, 2008; Bush & Saltarelli, 2000; Davies, 2010; Paulson, 2008, 2011; Smith & Vaux, 2003). As a result, both donors and national politicians increasingly support widespread and highly visible education policy changes at earlier stages of the reconstruction continuum, with curriculum reform being a primary vehicle for this symbolic signalling of change (Alubisia, 2005).

Reform to all aspects of the Timorese curriculum for the first eight years of school began in earnest in 2004. These changes were predicated on the belief that schools that reproduced behaviours, attitudes, and beliefs of the past was no longer appropriate or desirable within the context of the newly independent nation (Shah, 2012), seen in way past systems were constructed in the Fourth Constitutional Government's *Natonal Education Plan* (RDTL, 2008):

> The education system that prevailed in Timor-Leste up to 1999 may be characterized as conventional or traditional, in the sense that it was the teacher who imparted knowledge in the classroom through a repetitive manner and following a predetermined sequence. This method favoured memorizing over understanding, and did not prepare the citizens for critical reflection and for autonomous decision-making.

Given the conflict-ridden and fragmented past of the still fledgling state, motivations for reform have been couched in language of instilling democratic and shared values in future Timorese citizens, but also on promoting national economic and social development. LCP featured highly within this agenda with teachers "expected to build child centered practices into their daily lesson plans" (MECYS, 2004, p. 25). How LCP was conflated and asked to carry the hopes and dreams of a fledgling education system has proved to be problematic for policy implementers, within administration and in the classroom.

IMPLEMENTATION OF LCP IN TIMOR-LESTE

The main supporter of LCP in the new curriculum of Timor-Leste came from UNICEF who vigorously endorsed such pedagogy through documentation (UNICEF, 2005) and the *100 Friendly Schools* and later *Eskola Foun* programs.[11] UNICEF (2005, pp. 10-11) used local teachers to advocate for a child-centred curriculum: "the active participation of the children [sic] in the learning process...is a major improvement over the previous Indonesian curriculum"; and, "encourages children to be active players…expressing their thoughts and opinions…[which] in an emerging democracy is quite important." Subsequent documentation form the Ministry of Education embedded the ideas of LCP. Advice given to teachers to support the new primary curriculum (MECYS, 2005, p. ii), for example, explained that the curriculum was to be "more contextualized, more active, more integrated, more relevant, more efficient".

The strong endorsement and support of donors in promoting LCP was seen in the focussed teacher professional development programs such as those of UNICEF or the

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[11] The 100 Friendly Schools program aimed to "make learning more active, effective, and involved" for those involved in schools—namely teachers, parents and students (UNICEF, 2005, p. 21). The Eskola Foun s initiative is built around four main modules, one of which focuses on helping teachers to use 'active learning' in their classroom (Instituto para Formação Continuada, 2010).

Norwegian Refugee Council's *Compact Teacher Training Program*[12]. However, rather than imparting to teachers an understanding of the underpinning theories of learning that LCP promotes, ccourses of training offered by development partners have tended to focus on encouraging particular techniques of child-friendly pedagogies, such as group work, activities-based organisation, songs and games and how to display work as an indication of positive classroom environment. The focus on structures and activity has left teachers without a basis on which to understand the changes to pedagogy and instead provided a "grab-bag" of activities without the theory that should come alongside it.

Since the new curriculum was premised on LCP, teachers nationwide received some orientation to the new pedagogy and structures, but this was minimal. Having initially decided that the curriculum would be introduced progressively, but in-depth, over several years, starting with Grade One in 2005 and moving up one grade a year annually, the implementation program was significantly hastened in 2007 to allow all teachers access to the curriculum. Thus, all teachers throughout the country had a copy of the curriculum (UNICEF, 2010), but with most only receiving the initial two-day workshop. While the Ministry succeeded in "implementing" the new curriculum by 2008, the Ministry and development partners jointly acknowledged that teachers would need ongoing professional support to effectively utilise and implement the curriculum—a matter that has never been effectively resolved {Shah, 2011c). Instead training offered to teachers since initial implementation of the curriculum has been superficial at best and contradictory to LCP at worst.

The confusion as to what constitutes LCP can be seen in the more recent documents that identify "quality" in Timorese education. The draft *National Quality School Standards Framework* (Ministry of Education, 2010b, p 24, 35), designed to provide indicators of school progress toward quality education, identify confusing and formalistic messages on what child-centred pedagogy entails. For example, a classroom is deemed as child-centred and child friendly if:

- Student work is displayed and acknowledged and praised within class and changed every 3 months;

- The classroom has a variety of student work displayed;
- Learning corners are set up; and
- A variety of student grouping and seating is evident.

These standards, largely superficial constructs of child-centeredness, do little to measure the quality of the learning experience for children, or the degree to which underlying pedagogical discourse has shifted towards a competence-based model.

Perhaps the most telling of the void between LCP principles and their application can be seen in the way that teachers themselves were trained in this approach. Training offered within the government mandated in-service support for teachers, held in

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[12] NRC's Compact Teacher Training Programme (CTT), which operated as a one-year pilot programme in 2010. Implemented in 30 remote schools, across two districts of Timor-Leste, the programme's intent was to offer a field-based and contextually driven programme of training with a number of learning sessions focussed on making learning more interactive and student-centred (Shah & Leneman, 2010).

"stand-down" periods between school years, has hardly espoused learner-centeredness. Programmed in sessions of up to two hours in duration, the training is typically lecture- format and provide little opportunity for the Timorese teachers being trained to shape and participate in the learning process.[13] This was coupled with the fact that training was often conducted in Portuguese, a langauge that many teachers were still learning, hardly catering for the linguistic or literacy needs of teachers who were grappling with new concepts and practices. This technical-rational approach to teacher training, focussed on the transmission of knowledge and skills about 'good teaching' which trainees then apply, does not appropriately model the more loosely framed and classified curriculum approach that learner-centred pedagogy implies (Lewin & Stuart, 2003). And, considering the base of teachers in Timor-Leste as minimally or not qualified, these conditions have not been conducive for uptake of new pedagogy. Training, it could be argued, has had very little residual effects in terms of maintaining effective student-centred approaches, and where observed its application is often formalistic and lacking real connection to learning processes (Instituto para Formação Continuada, 2010; Shah & Leneman, 2010).

OBSERVED FORMS THAT LCP TAKES

In light of what teachers and school directors have been provided in terms of LCP, what gets enacted within classroom is a reflection of and response to these conditions. Prior research from Timor-Leste has consistently found that teachers have 'resisted' the imposition of learner-centredness into their practice with most reverting to pedagogies that are performance-based and tightly framed and classified by the teacher (Instituto para Formação Continuada, 2010; Shah & Leneman, 2010; UNICEF, 2010). Analysis of the dominant pedagogical trends within classrooms the authors visited would confirm the continued tight framing and classification of pedagogy.

In observing many classrooms across the country, most lessons followed a similar structure in which the teacher would begin with a lecture, followed by students copying material and written activities into their notebooks silently and independently. After a long period of this independent work teachers would review answers to these activities, often by calling students to the board to present their answers. Some of the teachers interviewed were able to recognise that patterns of interaction stood as antithetical to reform intentions.

> The problem is that many times the teacher presents himself as the one that knows everything and keeps talking, and the students just sit there as statues, not giving opportunities for the students to express themselves. And sometimes, the teacher just goes ahead and does the tasks for the students, instead of allowing the students to do the task themselves. [EPRV, FG]

The findings of Quinn (2010, 2011, 2012) indicate that when talk is enacted in classrooms, it is heavily controlled by the teacher with strict patterns of initiation

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[13] This is based on observations by the authors of training sessions that were occurring in March 2010. It is feasible that training models could have shifted since then.

and response, a narrow classroom speech activity {Sinclair, 1975 #612} more aligned with patterns of control than oral interaction. Students are lead into providing repetitions of choral answers, typically answers that are known and display known knowledge. As described by one teacher:

> Students in Timor-Leste are not given an opportunity to speak in their classrooms…the teachers talk at the students from the time they enter until the time they leave. When teachers act like this, it doesn't allow for the ideas that are contained in students' heads to be expressed. [EPRV, FG]

From the above, it could be easy to infer that most teachers are largely resistant to the imposition of child-centred pedagogies and a more loosely framed and classified curriculum approach. However, to make such an assumption obfuscates the more complex reality of teachers' practice.

Many teachers cited practical constraints as a reason for the dissonance between their knowledge of better practice, and what they were capable of doing. For instance, large class sizes with upwards of 50-60 students, commonplace in the first two years of schooling in particular, precluded teachers from enacting instances of diverent discussion. The only way that they could manage such large numbers of students was through a continuance of a tightly framed and classified instructional programe, primarily to maintain some level of discipline and order in the classroom. As one teacher noted, in exasperation, "To do activities in groups of six is almost impossible because there is no space to move, let alone for the students to breathe" [EPRV, FG].

Some teachers felt trapped into particular practices by the lack of resources available. The lack of textbooks or other classroom resoures was given as a the reason they continued to copy large sections of texts onto the blackboard for students to copy. One teacher working in a classroom with insufficient textbooks and where students were forced to sit four to a desk questioned rhetorically

> To teach in an active way, you need to have all the resources at your disposal…if you have no desk, no chairs, no books how is this possible? [EPBM, FG]

While the newer textbooks in classrooms are structured around more LCP-structures of interaction with text, teachers did not necessarily have the skill or disposition to use them in this way. As one teacher noted (Shah, 2012, p. 282):

> [it's] not showing the **proper** [emphasis added] way of doing Maths, so we have to use our knowledge to teach students instead. If we go according to the book, the students will fall behind and not learn

Also frequently observed in many classrooms was a creative mediation of LCP, where teachers reformulated the messages and activities of LCP to suit their current underlying pedagogical belief system and set of practices. While many believed they were incorporating "active learning" by giving students opportunities to come to the board, having chances to speak during the lesson, work in groups, or engage in brainstorming, such activities took place within a tightly framed and classified classroom environment.

In such environments, students rarely asked questions, were shamed if they made a public mistake and few opportunities existed for students to form responses to questions. Interestingly, although silent individual work was the norm, teachers saw this as building autonomy and control over what they were doing, giving students "responsibility over their learning, and was part of them learning to be independent" [EPRC, FG].

When teachers incorporated aspects of LCP into lessons it tended to be done so without understanding the role of the teacher as facilitator of such a process. If students were placed in groups, they often received too little guidance for any real learning to occur. Without management of group work such as frameworks for the tasks and clear goals, many students became off-task or disengaged from the lesson. As noted by teachers in one focus group, this presented a challenge because:

> … with group work you also have to be aware of how students are managing their time because sometimes they just fool around and don't get anything done [EPRL, FG]

The practical struggles of managing such activities in a fashion which engaged students and/or allowed the teacher to maintain control often led teachers to return to practices and approaches that were familiar and safe to them. In several instances, teachers were observed returning to teacher-focussed control of the lesson when students became unmanageable or disinterested in the activity. One of the teachers, in commenting on such decisions, acknowledged, "*…we struggle when [these] activities don't go according to our plan, and so we give up*" [EPVV, FG].

When teachers used games or singing, such activities were often seen as an attempt to refocus student attention or reengage them, rather than to fundamentally shift the underlying pedagogical discourse. As one teacher observed:

> Things like singing or other more active activities can also motivate children to stay engaged in the classroom…if the children are sick and tired of being in the classroom, you can take them outside and do something different with them outside the classroom [EPRL, FG]

In general such activities were still seen as a fun distraction from learning rather than a vehicle by which learning could occur in a particular way.

Teachers have incorporated LCP into an existing school culture that remains strongly rooted to its colonial past. For this reason, culture of professional practice where clear boundaries remain between teacher and student in terms control of time, space and discourse in the classroom, and the curriculum still applied as a prescriptive document with rigidly structured divisions of time (Shah, 2011a). This is a direct product of a long legacy of colonialism which institutionalised a performance based pedagogical relationship between teachers and learners, and embedded in teacher practice a culture of following the rules, rather than adopting flexibility and adaptability to context.

And, in exploring the widening gap between curriculum intent and curriculum practice in Timorese classrooms, consideration must be given to the issue of ownership. Quinn (2006) argues that "principles of the new curriculum [include] ones that reflect the views of those consultants who helped write [it]," rather than

the state or other national actors. Heyward (2005, p. 33) raises a similar concern, noting that, "given the extensive donor support being provided [to curriculum reform]… there is a real sense in which the ownership of programs rest not primarily with the government and local agencies but with the international and foreign agencies and their personnel." The implementation of significant education reform requires a state apparatus that is able to bring together technically sound and detailed plans of action with adequate financial and human resources, strong involvement and ownership by administrators close to the ground, and well-developed systems for monitoring and evaluation (Little, 2010a, 2010b; Obanya, 2011; Oketch & Rolleston, 2007; Tawil & Harley, 2004). Such conditions are rarely found in states that have only recently emerged out of conflict, or long periods of colonisation. Economic stagnation or decline, typical of such states, may lead to policymakers being unwilling or unable to commit to long-term investments in reform action. This can often promote piecemeal rather than systemic change in the education sector (Brannelly, Ndaruhutse, & Rigaud, 2009; Turrent, 2011). Coupled with uncoordinated and/or poorly connected mechanisms of service delivery between central government and school-level stakeholders, there can often be little coherence to implementation actions (Little, 2010a; Obanya, 2011). Such has been the case in Timor-Leste where over a decade educational policies and programs focussed on quality improvement have promoted a discourse of active participation of citizens, teachers and the community in schooling, but without the requisite capacity or will on the part of the state or other actors to do so.

Ultimately, the question of upmost concern is have these forms of mediation resulted in a more relevant, contextualised, meaningful educational experience for the children of Timor-Leste? Evidence from our own classroom observations would suggest not, with many students noted to be disengaged, uninterested or unmotivated, which often leads to students 'slipping through the cracks' (Shah, 2011a, 2011b).[14]

CONCLUSION

Bernstein (1975, 1990) notes that competence based models of pedagogy, such as LCP, are effective in so far as teachers feel supported to construct meaning on this theory within the confines of their own classroom. Shifting pedagogy requires a high level of commitment and time from teachers to construct resources, establish particular types of relationships with students, and assess student knowledge individually. For many Timorese teachers this is feasible due to a number of factors that are pedagogic, pragmatic and historical in nature. Thus, as in other contexts throughout the Global South, tensions remain in Timor-Leste between competence pedagogical models, such as those promoted through learner-centred pedagogy, and the conditions and cultures of schooling (Barrett, 2008; Johnson, Monk, & Hodges, 2000; Sriprakash, 2010; Vavrus, 2009).

What has occurred instead is the borrowing of symbols of learner-centeredness (i.e. group work, games, rearrangement of seating) that are exemplified and highlighted

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[14] As evidence of this, repetition rates in Years One and Two in Timor-Leste average 30%, suggesting an education system that fails many of the youngsters in the classroom (Ministry of Education, 2010).

in training and current policy, but with outcomes that are antithetical to the intent of this pedagogy and of good teaching more generally. The borrowing of symbols of learner-centredness without the prerequisite understandings of its pedagogy, can lead to a situation where bad teaching practices and poor student outcomes are overlooked in the quest for modernisation and visible change.

Ultimately, what is necessary is appropriate consideration of how to adapt the underlying intent of a shift towards learner-centeredness – driven at least outwardly by a desire to make education more inclusive, democratic and equitable – to the local context, culture and structural conditions. This may mean that reform interventions need to focus on improving rather than transforming extant teaching practices, and acknowledge that pedagogy is more than just a simple binary or trajectory of progress from bad (i.e. teacher-centred) to good teaching (i.e. learner-centred) practices (Altinyelken, 2010a, 2010b; Barrett, 2007; Guthrie, 1990; Nyambe & Wilmot, 2008; Sriprakash, 2010; Tabulawa, 2003). It will also require great cognisance on the part of policymakers, and the donor communities working alongside them, that educational policymaking cannot be detached from educational politics and policies. The borrowing of symbols of change without the prerequisite structural and material conditions to bring reform about is insufficient at best, and deleterious at worst, to societal expectations of a schooling experience rectifying inequities of the past in post-conflict/colonial settings.

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