Building inclusive and transformative education in Timor Leste

Selviana Veronika Moruk, Zelio da Conceição Freitas
Instituto Superior Cristal, Balide Street, Dili, Timor Leste
*Corresponding e-mail: morukselviana1@gmail.com

Abstract

This research analyzes challenges and opportunities in developing inclusive and transformative education in Timor Leste. It faced challenges in building an education system that could reach all segments of society and promote social transformation. Using a qualitative approach through case studies in three districts—Dili, Baucau, and Oecusse, this research identified barriers in implementing inclusive education and explored innovative practices by schools and communities. The results showed significant progress in basic education access but highlighted gaps in quality and inclusion of marginalized groups. Collaborative approaches among the government, NGOs, and communities can create educational models suited to Timor Leste's socio-cultural context. The study emphasized strengthening teacher capacity, developing contextual curricula, and implementing supportive education policies. The results of this study are expected to contribute to the development of more responsive and effective education policies in Timor Leste, as well as add to the understanding of inclusive education in the context of post-conflict countries in general.

Keywords: capacity development, education policy, inclusive education, transformative education.

INTRODUCTION

Timor Leste—independent since 2002—is developing its education system after a long humanitarian conflict (Shah, 2012). The conflict between 1975 and 1999 severely damaged the education system in Timor Leste, resulting in the destruction of approximately 90% of schools and the departure of a majority of teaching personnel (World Bank, 2013). This condition created significant challenges for education in the new nation.

The country faces additional difficulties due to its varied languages and geography. With over 16 regional languages and mountainous areas, delivering equitable and high-quality education remains a significant challenge. The official language policy, using Tetun and Portuguese, creates problems for those in remote areas with different languages. Many children find it hard to receive meaningful education due to linguistic challenges and economic hardship (Shah & Quinn, 2016).

Despite some progress in education access—with primary education enrollment rising from 65% in 2002 to nearly 92% in 2019—the education quality remains low (World Bank, 2020). A significant number of students continue to face difficulties in acquiring fundamental literacy and numeracy skills, highlighting the need for improved teaching approaches and

educational support systems, showing the need for better educational approaches (UNICEF, 2020). Inclusive education in Timor Leste focuses on marginalized groups, including girls and children in remote areas (Burns et al., 2017). It calls for curriculum development that meets local needs and teaching methods that promote critical thinking (Freire, 2005; Shah, 2015). Collaboration among the government, NGOs, and communities is vital to create an inclusive education system. However, challenges in coordination exist. Globally, inclusive education supports sustainable development and the Sustainable Development Goals (SDGs), particularly SDG 4 on the quality of education. For Timor Leste, this approach could lead to sustainable national development (Shah & Quinn, 2016).

This research aims to comprehensively analyze the challenges and opportunities in building an inclusive and transformative education system in Timor Leste. By exploring the specific contexts of three different districts—Dili as a relatively developed capital city, Baucau as a medium-sized city, and Oecusse as an isolated enclave—the research seeks to understand the dynamics of education development in diverse contexts and identify potentially scalable practices. The results of this study are expected to contribute to the development of more responsive and effective education policies in Timor Leste, as well as add to the understanding of inclusive education in the context of post-conflict countries in general.

RESEARCH METHOD

This research used a qualitative approach with a case study design to explore the implementation of inclusive and transformative education in Timor Leste. The qualitative approach was chosen for its ability to generate in-depth understanding of complex social phenomena in their natural context (Creswell & Poth, 2018). Case study, as a research design, allows intensive exploration of specific cases that can provide rich insights into the implementation of inclusive education in various contexts in Timor Leste. This research adopted a social constructivist perspective, which recognizes that meaning is constructed through social interaction and influenced by cultural and historical context (Guba & Lincoln, 1994).

Data were collected in three districts in Timor Leste, namely Dili, Baucau and Oecusse, which were selected to represent a variety of geographical, socio-economic and cultural conditions. In each district, data were collected from different types of schools, including urban and rural schools, to ensure representation of different educational contexts. The data collection methods used included: (1) participatory observation in 12 schools (4 in each district) to observe teaching practices and classroom dynamics; (2) in-depth interviews with 36 key informants, including teachers, principals, education officials, NGO representatives and parents; (3) focus group discussions (FGDs) with 9 groups (3 in each district) involving students, teachers and community members; and (4) analysis of relevant policy documents, program reports and curriculum materials.

The data collection process took place over a six-month period, from January to June 2023, with the research team consisting of local and international researchers. The research team spent an average of two weeks in each school to conduct in-depth observations and build rapport with the

school community. Interviews were conducted in Tetum, Portuguese, or local languages according to informants' preferences, with the help of translators when needed. All interviews and FGDs were recorded with the informants' permission and then transcribed. Observations were documented through structured field notes that recorded physical, pedagogical and social aspects of the school environment and teaching practices.

Data analysis used a thematic analysis approach (Braun & Clarke, 2006) with the help of NVivo software for coding and organizing data. The analysis process involved several stages: (1) familiarization with the data through repeated reading of transcripts and field notes; (2) initial coding to identify relevant segments of data; (3) search for themes through grouping related codes; (4) review and definition of themes; and (5) integration of themes into a coherent narrative. To increase the reliability of the analysis, the researcher used data triangulation techniques by comparing findings from different sources and data collection methods.

Data validity in this study was sought through several strategies. For credibility, researchers used triangulation of methods and sources, prolonged engagement in the field, and member checking by returning initial interpretations to key informants for verification. Transferability was supported through a rich description of the context (thick description) that allows the reader to assess the relevance of the findings in other contexts. Dependability was achieved through clear documentation of the research process and a detailed audit trail. Confirmability was strengthened through researcher reflexivity, with the research team explicitly acknowledging their positionality and potential biases in data interpretation.

The study took into account various ethical considerations, including obtaining written informed consent from all informants after explaining the purpose of the study, assurance of confidentiality and anonymity, and the right to withdraw participation at any time. For research involving children, consent was obtained from parents or guardians and also from the children themselves through age-appropriate procedures. Official permission to conduct the research was obtained from the Timor Leste Ministry of Education and district education authorities. The study also received ethical approval from the ethics committee of the researcher's university.

It is important to recognize that this study has several limitations. First, although efforts were made to cover a variety of contexts, the three districts selected cannot fully represent the diversity of conditions across Timor Leste. Second, time and resource constraints limited the number of schools and informants that could be involved. Third, although researchers endeavored to build a relationship of trust with informants, factors such as language and status differences may affect informants' openness in sharing their experiences and perspectives. Nonetheless, data triangulation and researcher reflexivity helped to mitigate these limitations and increase the reliability of the findings.

RESULTS AND DISCUSSION

Structural challenges in implementing inclusive education
The implementation of inclusive education in Timor Leste faces significant challenges. A major issue is the limited education budget, which restricts

schools' ability to provide necessary infrastructure, materials, and resources for inclusion. According to the Timor Leste Ministry of Education (2020), the national education budget is about 9% of the total budget, much lower than UNESCO's recommended 15-20%. An education official in Dili noted that the limited budget makes it hard to meet all needs, especially in remote areas which often lack basic services for students with disabilities, affecting the quality of school facilities.

> "The limited budget makes it hard to meet all the needs of education, especially in remote areas. They often lack basic services for students with disabilities. Therefore, it affects the quality of school facilities."
> (Interview with an education official, February 1st, 2023).

Another significant challenge is the inadequate coordination among the multiple institutions engaged in implementing inclusive education. Despite the adoption of the national policy on inclusive education in 2017, many stakeholders are involved, leading to a fragmented approach that can result in duplicated efforts and service gaps (Shah & Quinn, 2016). A school principal in Baucau expressed frustration over inconsistent NGO programs, highlighting the need for better coordination for a sustainable system.

> "The NGO programs often run inconsistently. Therefore, we need a better coordination among stakeholders for a sustainable system."
> (Interview with a school principal, March 10th, 2023).

Limited institutional capacity at schools is also a significant challenge. Many schools lack trained staff in inclusive education, and resources such as special education centers are scarce. While some teacher trainings has been provided, it is often brief and insufficient for ongoing support, as highlighted by a teacher in Oecusse.

> "Some teacher trainings have been provided, but it oftenly run in brief and is insufficient for ongoing support."
> (Interview with a teacher in Oecusse, May 5th, 2023).

Geographical inequalities also pose challenges, with significant differences in educational resources and quality between urban and rural areas. In Oecusse district, access issues are heightened by high transportation costs and poor roads. A parent from a remote village stated that children sometimes have to walk for hours to reach school, and during rainy seasons, they may miss school for weeks. UNICEF (2020) reported that these disparities lead to high dropout rates and lower academic performance in remote areas.

> "Children sometimes have to walk for hours to reach school, and during the rainy seasons, they may miss school for weeks."
> (FGD with parents in Oecusse, May 12th, 2023).

Language policy presents additional challenges for inclusive education. With Tetun and Portuguese as the official education languages, children who speak local languages face barriers when joining the formal education system. Taylor-Leech (2013) observed that language policies

neglecting linguistic diversity can lead to exclusion. Classroom observations indicated that many early-grade students struggle to understand instructions in Portuguese or Tetun, prompting teachers to use local languages, while official learning materials are seldom available in those languages, resulting in a disconnect between classroom practices and official policies.

Teachers' role in facilitating inclusive and transformative education
This research highlights the important role of teachers in promoting inclusive education in Timor Leste. Observations and interviews show that teachers' knowledge, skills, attitudes, and practices significantly affect inclusion levels in classrooms. Teachers trained in inclusive teaching methods are more willing and better equipped to address student diversity and utilize participatory approaches. For example, we observed in January 20th, 2023, that a teacher in Dili effectively engages students through group work, visuals, and practical activities, encouraging quieter students and offering support to those struggling.

However, many teachers feel unprepared to implement inclusive education due to challenges like insufficient pre-service training, limited professional development, and a lack of ongoing support. A teacher in Baucau shared the struggle of managing a diverse class of 45 students without adequate training. Effective teacher professional development should combine theoretical training and practical classroom support (Forlin, 2013).

> "I struggled to manage a diverse class consisting of 45 students without adequate training."
> (Interview with a teacher in Baucau, March 12th, 2023).

The study also found that teachers face a challenge in applying transformative teaching methods within a system focused on exams and traditional approaches (Shah, 2015). The national curriculum emphasizes memorization over critical thinking, limiting teachers' ability to use innovative methods. A junior high school teacher in Dili expressed the difficulty of balancing interactive teaching with pressure to complete the syllabus before exams.

> "I found difficulties in balancing interactive teaching with pressure to complete syllabus before exams."
> (Interview with a junior high school teacher in Dili, January 25th, 2023).

Despite these challenges, some teachers have created innovative strategies to foster inclusion. One teacher in Baucau integrated local storytelling into literacy lessons, while a group in Oecusse formed a "teacher learning group" to share resources and strategies, showing the value of collaborative efforts in improving inclusive practices (Ainscow, 2005).

Students from marginalized groups experience in the education system
Analysis of the experiences of students from marginalized groups in Timor Leste, including children with disabilities, girls from poor families, and children from remote communities, shows the challenges of exclusion and

inclusion in the education system. Despite formal policies promoting inclusion, these students face many obstacles in accessing quality education and participating fully.

> "Some teachers are very helpful and make me feel welcome, but others ignore me. Classmates sometimes make fun of me, and it is difficult for me to participate in sports activities because there are no accommodations for me."
> (FGD with a girl with a physical disability in Dili, January 30th, 2023).

Children with disabilities encounter barriers such as inaccessible buildings, negative attitudes, lack of necessary aids, and low expectations from others. While awareness of their right to inclusive education is growing, implementation remains inconsistent and often relies on individual efforts rather than comprehensive strategies (Burns et al., 2017). A positive case from a Dili school involved a principal who collaborated with local disability organizations to improve accessibility and train teachers.

> "Before, my child was never accepted in any school. Here, teachers provide extra support and adapt tasks to suit his abilities. Now he enjoys going to school and has made some progress."
> (Interview with a parent, February 2nd, 2023).

For rural girls, socio-cultural expectations and economic hardship further hinder educational access. Although the gender gap in primary enrollment has decreased, girls often drop out before secondary school due to household duties, safety issues, early marriage, and family priorities.

> "Many families still prioritize boys' education, especially when they have to make difficult choices due to limited resources."
> (A personal communication with a teacher at Dili High School, May 8th, 2023).

Students from remote areas face challenges like physical access to schools, limited educational resources, and lower education quality. Studies reveal that schools in these regions have worse teacher-student ratios and lower graduation rates compared to urban schools. Additionally, adolescents from a remote village in Baucau reported having to walk long distances to school, leading to high absenteeism and dropout rates (Boon et al., 2019).

Innovation in inclusive and transformative education: a promising practice
This study highlights innovative efforts that have improved the inclusiveness and quality of education in Timor Leste, despite various challenges. One key initiative is the Mother Tongue-Based Multilingual Education (MTB-MLE) program, supported by UNICEF, where students are taught in their mother tongue during the early years. This method transitions to Tetun and then Portuguese, leading to better student participation and learning outcomes, especially in areas where the mother tongue significantly differs from Tetun or Portuguese (Taylor-Leech, 2013).

> "Teaching in Makasae transformed quiet children into active students with improved understanding."
> (Interview with a teacher from Baucau, March 14th, 2023).

Community-based strategies are also yielding positive results. In some areas, parent groups and local leaders are working together to find out-of-school children, tackle barriers to education, and support inclusive practices. An Oecusse initiative formed village-level "inclusive education committees" made up of parents, teachers, local leaders, and youth. These committees promote awareness about the importance of education, monitor student attendance, and collaborate with schools to help vulnerable children (Shah & Quinn, 2016; Miles, 2010).

Some schools are innovating with transformative teaching methods by incorporating local issues into the curriculum and promoting critical thinking. For instance, a junior high school in Dili engaged students in project-based learning about local environmental challenges, leading to practical solutions like cleaning polluted water sources. During a focus group discussion with local teachers on January 27th, 2023, participants suggested practical solutions like cleaning polluted water sources.

Finally, collaboration between schools, NGOs, and government agencies has produced effective programs for inclusive education. A partnership among the Ministry of Education, an international NGO, and a local university established resource centers that offer teacher training, adapted materials, and support for students with special needs, significantly aiding educational practices.

CONCLUSION

This research examines how inclusive and transformative education is being implemented in Timor Leste, focusing on the challenges and opportunities in three districts. The study finds that while there are policy commitments and some positive initiatives, significant challenges remain due to structural, cultural, and operational issues. These include limited education budgets, poor coordination among stakeholders, and inadequate resources, which mainly affect marginalized groups like children with disabilities and those in remote areas.

However, the research also highlights innovative practices that could help build a more inclusive education system. Successful initiatives include mother tongue-based multilingual education, community involvement to enhance inclusion, and adapting global strategies to local contexts. Key factors for success are strong school leadership, community engagement, and ongoing teacher support.

Based on research findings, several recommendations aim to enhance inclusive and transformative education in Timor Leste: (1) Increase budget allocations for inclusive education and create fair financing mechanisms to address regional and economic disparities. (2) Improve coordination among stakeholders by establishing clear structures at national and district levels with defined roles. (3) Invest in building capacity for inclusive education through teacher training reforms and support systems. (4) Expand mother tongue-based multilingual education, especially in areas with dominant local languages. (5) Develop a responsive curriculum that integrates local knowledge and promotes critical thinking. (6) Enhance community involvement in education by creating participation mechanisms and leveraging community resources. (7) Adopt a cross-sectoral approach that

connects education with health, social protection, and community development.

The study emphasizes the importance of contextualization in inclusive education, noting that a universal approach may not work in Timor Leste due to its diverse conditions. A strong national framework needs flexibility for local adaptation, enabling schools and communities to create tailored strategies. Future research should focus on the experiences of marginalized students, find ways to address language barriers, and assess the long-term effects of inclusion initiatives. Building an inclusive education system requires ongoing commitment, collaboration, and investment despite the challenges faced.

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