

ICWA LETTERS

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Southeast Asia

Curt Gabrielson, a science teacher and an Institute Fellow, is observing the re-establishment of education in East Timor.

Building From the Ground Up: Education in New East Timor

January 31, 2001
Dili, East Timor

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Dear Peter,

As I peered in through the classroom's back window, I witnessed an educational scene like none I had ever seen before. There were no chairs, no desks, no blackboard, no door, nothing in the windows. Forty or so third-graders were scattered across the floor of the room and the teacher was writing on the wall in the unpainted spot where the blackboard once had been. The rest of the walls were covered with graffiti, some quite profane. Most of the kids on the floor had very thin notebooks and were making some effort to copy what the teacher had written, in Indonesian language, on the wall.

In my years of observing education in process, I have found it to be very much like observing wildlife in the streams of my native Missouri. From a distance one can see very little detail and draw few conclusions. However, upon stepping into the water, one finds that most key players dart about unnaturally and soon there has been such an eddy of silt stirred up that all hopes of observing the normal flow of events must be abandoned.

Thus I adopt two strategies when observing both streams and schools: stealth,



No furnishings, but plenty of smiles. Number 3 Primary School, Bekora, Dili.



These kids are heading home, though it's only 10 in the morning in Bekora, Dili.

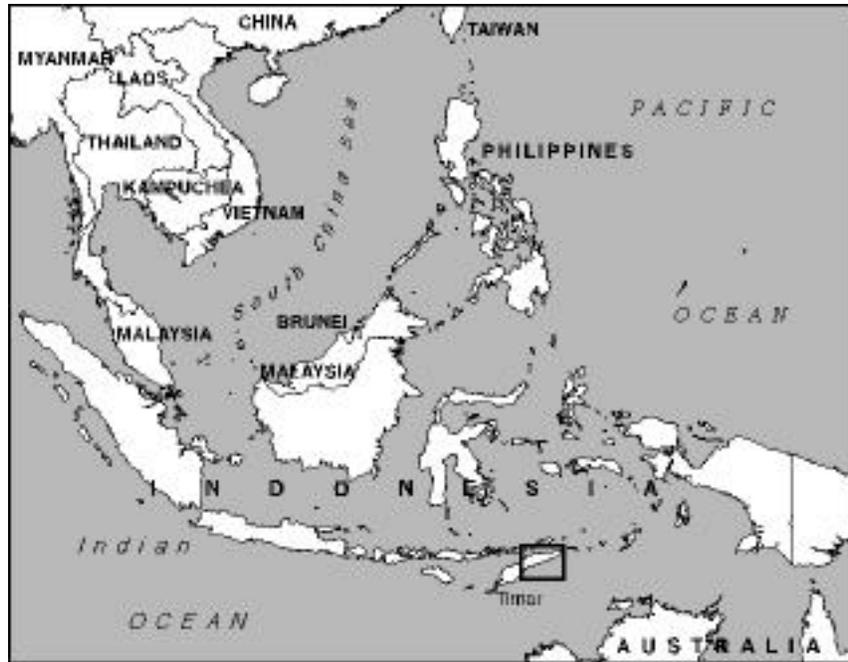
and long-term residence. While I intend to focus on the latter here in East Timor, I have been gaining much insight by employing the former in my first months of residence. So it was that I found myself perched on a rock watching this third-grade class.

The time was 8:15 in the morning. My neighbor kids were in some nearby classroom and they had walked the same modest quarter mile I had from home to school. They had been there since 7a.m., and would return home at 10. For the rest of the day there is no activity at this school and my neighbor kids amuse themselves in the street. In some schools, there are different students using the classrooms in the afternoons, but any given teacher or student seems to be in the classroom at most four hours a day. Education is off to a slow start in East Timor.

In September 1999, somewhere between 70 and 90 percent of the approximately 970 schools in East Timor were burned, looted, or otherwise debilitated. When the violence finally ended, the schools were set upon by people looking to refurbish their demolished homes. I have seen many a school chair or desk in homes, offices and restaurants. Even the headmaster for the only functioning high school in Suai served me coffee in his home on a desk marked "SMA" – the Indonesian abbreviation for an academic senior high school. This explains where doors, windows and blackboards disap-

peared to as well. Roofing material (mostly corrugated sheet metal) was totally lifted from schools both by the militias, who took it with them in their exodus across the border to West Timor, and later by locals, who used it to repair their own roofs.

There was wide and early recognition that measures must be taken to deal with the wreckage of the schools of East Timor. The World Bank, which is managing a trust fund for the new nation, granted U.S.\$13.9 million to East Timor for the Emergency School Readiness Project (ESRP). The main goal of ESRP's Phase One was the following: "...schools will be clean, safe and covered, will be supplied with basic furniture, books and other learning-teaching materials..." The Bank hoped to have schools ready for students by October 2000.





The Emergency School Readiness Project in central Dili appears to be piles of various building materials sitting in the lot of a burned out building.

That the goals of ESRP Phase One had not been achieved by January 31, 2001, even in an easily accessible district in the capital city, is indicative of the challenges faced by all sectors of East Timor's emerging education system.

UNICEF, USAID, AUSAID, the UN Peace-Keeping Force, and several other bilateral and international Non-Governmental Organizations (NGOs) used money from the ESRP to carry out a much-publicized reroofing campaign. Individual schools were evaluated and prioritized by local authorities, and nearly 2,700 classrooms were targeted. But the project was fraught with problems. In a November radio interview, a UNICEF spokesperson acknowledged that the second stage of their reroofing operation had been postponed four months due to a delay in the shipping of materials. UNICEF estimated that only 90 percent of the reroofing would be done by December 2000.

In Fatumean Kraik, a remote border village in the district of Covalima, the primary school has five small buildings for its 173 kids. Roberto Carlos, the village chief,

showed me the largest building and its newly installed roof of shiny corrugated sheet metal. Two other buildings have been covered with giant blue-nylon tarps donated and monogrammed by the UN High Commission for Refugees. The two remaining school buildings stand roofless. Next year, Roberto is hoping to get permanent traditional grass roofs installed on more of the buildings with the support of an international NGO. So far, no NGO has made an offer. Many villagers still do not have adequate housing because all the grass was used to make roofs last fall, and it will not grow back again for several

more months. To make things even more difficult, the source of the grass is several kilometers away, and no one in the town owns a truck.

It appears that progress has slowed to a crawl in the categories of roofing and classroom furnishing. Last week the electricity in our part of Dili was off for four days. I needed to recharge our cell phone, so I walked to a house just down our street in which a small generator can be heard running 16 hours a day. In addition to being invited to plug in



Seventy-two students make for a difficult job of teaching even in a school with seats. Number 3 Primary School, Bekora, Dili.



There are a few desks but no chairs in most junior-high classrooms. An English class in Number 3 Jr. High School.

my phone, I discovered the purpose of the generator; it supplies electricity for several cheap, hand power tools that six men are currently using to build 1,000 chairs and 500 desks for elementary schools in the eastern districts East Timor. While their production is slow and inefficient due to poor facilities and tools, they told me how much better this arrangement is than that of the university, which imported several thousand plastic “resort” chairs from a foreign manufacturer, thus costing the local economy scarce money. The craftsmen are making quite nice little folding chairs, and will be done with this order within a month. They hope to get other contracts after that.

The job of providing chairs and roofs is a trivial issue compared with others facing the Interim National Educational Authority (INEA). Many textbooks have not been distributed, and texts for some subjects and some grades have yet to be published. Many, if not most, families in East Timor don’t have the cash to buy their children notebooks and pencils. There is still no consensus about which language to use in schools. In some districts, the local education office is not following national mandates.

Perhaps the most visible nagging problem is widespread discontent resulting from the flawed teacher-selection process

carried out nearly a year ago. Teachers from various districts and educational levels demonstrate almost weekly in front of the main UN offices in Dili, as well as at several district offices.

This discontent may well stem from a long history of poor education policies in East Timor. When the Portuguese left East Timor in 1975, they hadn’t put a lot of effort into education. Indonesian sources claim there were fewer than 100 functioning Portuguese schools in 1975. Other sources say the number was closer to 500, but it is clear that only children from upper-class families, mostly Portuguese and Mesticos (mixed), had

the opportunity to attend any school at all.

The arrival of Indonesia hardly improved matters. A report on education in East Timor at the end of the Indonesian occupation, published by East Timor International Support Center (ETISC) of Darwin, Australia, makes clear that Indonesian educational standards were considerably lower in East Timor than in other provinces. The facilities were very poor, as was the teaching quality. ETISC estimates that when East Timor achieved independence,



The school is often the largest building, and institution, in a village. This one is in Fatululik, Covalima district.

a mere 4,380 East Timorese had received any sort of degree of higher education. This constitutes less than .5 percent of the population. AUSAID gives equally bleak figures about the intellectual reserves of East Timor: 66 percent of the population are illiterate, and 60 percent of those over 15 years of age have never been to school.

It comes as no surprise then, that many of the teachers in Indonesian times were imported from other areas of Indonesia. Indonesians comprised nearly 10 percent of primary-school teachers, 86 percent of junior-high teachers and 97 percent of senior-high teachers. I have not heard that a single one of these Indonesian teachers is still present in East Timor. Educational administration was also made up primarily of Indonesians, also long departed. There is clearly a shortage of qualified educational personnel in East Timor today.

In the fall of 1999, most schools did not open on time in anticipation of the referendum of August 30. As I de-



Students of the Catholic academic high school in Baucau attend a morning pep talk before going to their classes.

scribed in my first newsletter, chaos and terror precluded any organized activities in September and October 1999. During the “emergency period” of October 1999 to June 2000, the UN Transitional Administration in East Timor (UNTAET) recruited teachers to keep the schools open. Few schools had any facilities whatsoever, but much effort was made to keep kids occupied and out of trouble.

Teachers of that period received rice and \$20 per month.¹ There were more than enough teachers in the schools then, and most hoped to gain a permanent teaching position.

The stage was set for the current muddle. The teacher-selection process that took place in the spring and summer of 2000 was initiated by local educational leaders. The stated purpose of the process was to select a set of qualified teachers that would be sufficient to meet the needs of East Timor while staying within the limited education budget. The target was 3,000 primary school teachers and 1,740 secondary school teachers.

From an external perspective, these numbers seem easy to deal with. There are many



A brand new roof and a brand new sign proclaim the good will of UNICEF, Australia, United Kingdom, and Japan. Bucoli Primary School, Baucau district.

¹ The US dollar is the official currency of East Timor. This may be true, but you still need Indonesian rupiah if you intend to purchase anything at a local shop or market.

more teachers than that in one modest city in the United States. With a population of less than one million, East Timor strikes me and many other foreigners working here as full of hope and possibility. It seems a do-able job, a problem with a solution.

But from the inside, 4,740 teaching positions represented an extreme squeeze of staff, and the groans of discomfort were predictable. There were approximately 7,000 teachers and volunteers working in primary schools in the first half of year 2000, according to UNICEF. This was only a slightly higher number than were employed in the last years of the Indonesian occupation. In those years the primary-school student/teacher ratio was around 40 to 1. The teacher selection process of year 2000 would send 4,000 would-be teachers away from primary schools, leaving the student/teacher ratio at nearly 90 to 1.

And how was the cut made? With that quintessential academician's tool of indubitable blind justice: the examination. Twelve East Timorese and one "educational specialist" from Oxford University compiled the test for primary-school teachers. The test was given to 5,400 people, the rest of the 7,000 being disqualified by several prerequisite conditions. The completed bubble sheets were shipped off to Australia for computer evaluation and the results were returned three days later.²

The test had two sections: curriculum knowledge, and methodology. At the last moment, the board of pedagogues apparently altered their education theory, and only the score from the first part was

used to determine who was hired as a teacher. Each district filled the teaching positions that had been allocated to that district with the top scorers on the test.

The scheme for secondary-school teacher selection was less well defined. The national office agreed upon a list of qualifications that was used to rank candidates according to their education and experience. Most districts did not have nearly enough qualified candidates, so a call was issued throughout East Timor for anyone who met the educational minimums to apply for a teaching position. Most responses came from recent graduates of Indonesian universities who were living in Dili. Candidates were "reviewed" by the national education office and assigned to positions throughout the country.

Confusion reigned over the selection process from the start. Many complained of not being notified about the test, or not being briefed on how it would be administered or used. Some say the prerequisites for taking the test were too rigid and eliminated many good teachers. In some districts, the local education office ignored the results of the test, or reported receiving contrary oral instructions from the national office. In other districts there were accusations of nepotism and foul play. Many secondary teachers who were assigned from Dili to another district did not show up for work. Some of these still managed to collect their pay. Many districts favored local secondary teacher candidates over teachers from Dili even though the locals did not meet the minimum requirements.

In September 2000, the cabinet of UNTAET asked its Inspector General to make an inquiry into the teacher-selection process. The resulting two-part report issued in October and November spanned 41 pages plus vast appendices and made 23 recommendations, which included the establishment of a separate standing committee to investigate complaints regarding teacher recruitment. While education in East Timor is still stumbling, educational bureaucracy is off to a running start.

Who are the main actors in developing the education system here? While such international NGOs as Concern, International Rescue Committee, Jesuit Refugee Services, Oxfam, Aide Medicale Internationale France, Christian Children's Fund and several bilateral national-aid agencies, such as USAID and AUSAID, are doing scattered work in education,



Two girls heading off to school. Bekora, Dili.

² My colleague in California recently sent me word that his elementary school had nearly been shut down as a result of students' inadequate scoring on a standardized test, and only after great protest and turmoil was it discovered that the computer was in error.

most international educational personnel in East Timor work for UNTAET and UNICEF.

The UNTAET education office is a small and confusing place. No one seems to be in charge, and there is a perpetual flock of East Timorese youth milling around the door awaiting news of possible scholarships to study abroad (mostly in Indonesia). It is unclear where UNTAET stops and INEA starts. The head of the UNTAET education division is Mr. Tesfamichael Rezene, an Ethiopian who has been residing in Los Angeles in recent years. There are seven other people working in the education division, and most of them think this is insufficient.

The UNICEF office is across town from UNTAET. It is easy to spot, thanks to all the big white moonrover-like vehicles parked in front. The head of Education is Maurice Robson, an Australian. In their sterile, air-conditioned offices one can almost forget one is in East Timor. Mr. Robson had an air of calmness as he described UNICEF's plans and programs in education.

"Who do you work with at UNTAET in teacher training?" I asked.

"When we ask UNTAET about teacher training, they tell us to go to CNRT," he replied mysteriously.

"And who do you work with at CNRT?"

"Ms. Manuela Gusmao, but she is in Brazil at the moment. If you find it confusing, so do we."

The CNRT, *Conseho Nacional Resistencia Timorese*, is an umbrella group for the majority of East Timorese political organizations. The CNRT was formed in Indonesian times to present a united front against Indonesia. Today it is still the dominant political force in East Timor, and although there are many internal problems and some fragmentation has occurred, it is still widely respected. The president of CNRT, Xanana Gusmao, was commander of East Timor's guerrilla forces and, after his capture in 1992, continued to lead the resistance struggle from a political prison in Jakarta. Although he has recently made clear that he will not run for the presidency this fall, he is the defacto leader of the East Timorese.

Most local education officials, as well as most East



A typical campus view at Number 3 Jr. High School.

Timorese holding positions within UNTAET, are CNRT members. The UNTAET cabinet member in charge of the Department of Social Affairs, which oversees the INEA, is Father Filomeno Jacob. A prominent CNRT leader, he is a Jesuit priest educated in Europe and reputed to speak seven languages.

The CNRT is not an official organ of the transitional government. At the same time, it has much rapport among the people; it is organized, and it has a plan. At times the CNRT has stonewalled UNTAET decisions and programs that did not match CNRT plans. Father Filomeno was described to me as "despotic" in his early months in office by one member of the UNTAET education office. But many have also commented to me about how wise the CNRT has been in taking full control of education. After all, should foreigners be making decisions affecting the teaching of East Timorese children?

Plenty would like to. The government of Japan offered to write the national curriculum for East Timor. (It was turned down.) The government of Portugal sent 200 teachers to East Timor to teach Portuguese in the public schools. There are half a dozen international NGOs looking to do teacher training here. Virtually all international education people I have met in East Timor scorn the teaching methods employed by East Timorese teachers, and are convinced that they can show the way to a brighter tomorrow. I sometimes have such thoughts myself. I know from experience, though, that this is folly. The right methods for East Timor's education will most surely come from the East Timorese, and only after considerable time and effort.

The hard questions remain: How can the East Timorese educational community best tap into the plentiful experience and information of the internationals now

present in East Timor? If “lecture and listen” is all that is being used in schools, what is the path to a more dynamic pedagogy? If many teachers do not know the basic material they are supposed to be teaching, how are pedagogy and knowledge to be balanced in a teacher-training program? How can a teacher-training program be made effective if there is barely enough chalk available for many teachers to write one day’s lesson on the wall? And where can an open debate about these issues take place in the current society of East Timor?

Kaspar, my Tetum tutor, is an English teacher for third- and fourth-grade students in a local Catholic school. His school was not hit hard, and is recovering quite well from the destruction of 1999. He showed me his lesson plans. They were a series of exercises he had authored that the students would copy and complete. He would write them on the board, read them in English, translate them into Indonesian, translate them again into Tetum, and then the students would copy them and practice orally among themselves.

Kaspar said that his students were very anxious to learn English, and that his biggest problems were other teachers. He said many of the other teachers were jeal-

ous of him because he had only a high-school education, and yet had passed the test and become a teacher. (And a teacher gets a good salary - \$123 per month)

Adding insult to injury, the attractive and dynamic young man is very popular with his students, which can’t be said for many of the older teachers.

Envy and personal competition among teachers caps a long list of troubles for the budding education system in East Timor. Yet there is much reason to hope, and much hope is displayed. After all, freedom has arrived and *Ukun Rasik An* — self government — is on the way. The East Timorese are, for the most part, running their own schools. My neighbor kids may not get much from their three daily hours in school, but they can be seen happily marching off every morning with clean clothes and stubby pencils. Watching them go, I am filled with confidence that the troubles of today can and will be resolved.

Yours,



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