

## Curriculum Changes in East Timor: What About Educators?

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**Abstract:** The reform of the education system and the curricular changes that have taken place over the last few years in Timor-Leste have caused significant changes in pre-school education and, consequently, educators have been faced with new challenges, such as, increasing their roles and responsibilities. These challenges stem, among other factors, from the introduction of new methods and techniques for assessing learning, the excessive activities they have to develop and the expansion of their functions. In this context, the research question is: how do preschool educators view the curriculum and the assessment of learning in the context of curricular changes at this level of education? The main instrument for data collection was the semi-structured interview, carried out with four kindergarten teachers, performing their professional activity in two public institutions located in two municipalities in the country. Data were analyzed using content analysis. The results point out that, for most educators, the current curriculum facilitates the exercise of their functions as educators, since in the lesson plan and in the session plan, issued by the Ministry of Education, both the teaching methodology and the , such as the technique and method of evaluation, grids, teaching plans, criteria and evaluation indicators. The curriculum that used to be centered on teaching and educators is now more centered on learning and children. However, the curriculum contains an excess of recreational activities, which can harm the learning of the contents and leave the educator insecure to evaluate, as he does not have enough time to observe the development of all children. Despite the advantages they recognize in the current curriculum, they consider that the previous curriculum gave educators more autonomy to adapt activities and assessment to each context.

**Key words:** educators of the kindergarten , curriculum, assessment, Timor-Leste

### 1. Introduction

In Timor-Leste, over the last few years there have been changes in the teaching curriculum, both in the pre-school curriculum and in the three cycles of basic education. In this case, we understand that there are several factors that make a curriculum change. Some of these factors are: political orientations and state practice, the changing view of intellectuals, new thinking about the teaching and learning process, changes in society, according to curriculum theory (Pacheco, 2001).

According to the preamble of Decree-Law number no. 3/2015, of January 14th (which approves the national basic curriculum for pre-school education), its potential being directly linked to a solid foundation in childhood in the early years of education, it recognizes and values the role of the family in implementing the national core curriculum for this level of education. However, all public, private or cooperative pre-school education

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establishments that are part of the public service education network and that provide pre-school education are required to apply the respective basic national curriculum (paragraph 1 of art. 2 and paragraph 1 of article 3 of Decree-Law n.º 3/2015).

For the purposes of Decree-Law no. n.º 3/2015, at three years of the pre-school education period. In addition, “the curriculum is materialized in study plans, as well as in teaching methods and techniques designed according to the curricular results that form its content” and the development of skills and knowledge that have been acquired by children, having as a reference the curricular programs, as well as the learning outcomes that are achieved by the age group and the essential core of this curriculum are the guiding principles, learning outcomes and the minimum teaching hours (*idem*, points 1-5 of art. 3).

In 2015, the government made a significant change in the curriculum of pre-school education, such as the language of instruction, the method and technique of implementing curriculum programs and assessment of learning for this level of education. In addition, by recognizing the difficulties of educators, current curriculum policy provides further assistance by offering session plan manuals for educators that contain all activities for each session, implementation methods and techniques, instructions use of the mother tongue, in the sense of explaining the contents, that is, explaining the words that children cannot understand in Tetum.

However, significant changes in the educational system and changes in the curriculum, especially at this level of education, cause educators “to face new challenges, such as increasing roles and responsibilities” (Flores, Day & Viana, 2007, p. 8). These challenges result from the introduction of new learning assessment methods and techniques, the focus of the curriculum and the excessive activities in the session plan that was offered by the Ministry of Education to educators in the context where they exercise their functions as teachers. In fact, the aforementioned challenges arose at a time when educators had not yet been prepared, either in the implementation of the curriculum, or in the use of learning assessment tools suited to the types of learning assessment. However, in Timor-Leste, pre-school education is still carried out “in separate units or included in school buildings where basic education is also provided or, even, in buildings where other social activities are carried out, namely, the valence of day care or out-of-school education with respect for the specific nature of children from three cycles to six years” (paragraph 5 of article 53 of the LBE). Furthermore, in most pre-school education schools in this country, there are not enough educational resources, such as resources in digital support, equipment for music and plastic education, the school library and media libraries and resources for special education.

It is in this context that our problem arises: how do pre-school educators view the curriculum and the assessment of learning in the context of curricular changes at this level of education?

As a result of this problem, we defined the following objectives: 1) Know the curricular changes and their influence on the practice of preschool education educators and; 2) Understand the learning assessment practices of educators in pre-school education.

## **2. Methodology**

This study determined a clear option for qualitative research that “is dedicated to the analysis of concrete cases, in their particularities of time and space, starting from the manifestations and activities of people in their own contexts” (Flick, 2005, p. 13). In this study, the specific case is pre-school education, with a focus on curricular changes and their influence on curricular management and on the practice of learning assessment, with the aim of knowing and understanding the perspectives of educators.

The participants for this study are four pre-school education educators, working in two public establishments located in two different municipalities in the country, namely municipality Dili is the capital of Timor-Leste and municipality Bobonaro. In order to protect, respect and guarantee the confidentiality of the data and the anonymity of the participants, an E code was assigned to the preschool education educator who served for this study.

In the following table, we present, in detail, the characteristics of the participants in terms of gender, age group, academic qualifications, professional situation, length of service and also the weekly workload.

**Table 1 Characterization of Participants**

Participants	Age group	sex	Academic qualifications	Professional Situation	Service Time	Weekly Workload
E1	25–35	F	Secondary	HE	5 a 10	20 hrs/W
E2	≥ 56	F	Fourth Grade/intensive course	HE	5 a 10	15 hrs/W
E3	≥ 56	M	Bachelor’s degree	PE	11 a 15	15 hrs/W
E4	36–45	F	Licenciatura	HE)	5 a 10	15 hrs/W

Subtitle: E: educator; PE: permanente educator and; HE: Hired Educator.

As can be seen from the analysis of the Table 1 above, three participants are female and one male. Two interviewees are aged between 56 and over, one interviewee is aged between 36 and 45 and one is aged between 25 and 35 years.

As for academic qualifications, one participant has secondary education, one has fourth grade and is currently attending the teacher training course at UNTL (National University of Timor-Leste), one has a Bachelor’s degree and one has a Licentiate. As for the professional situation of the interviewees, one is a permanent educator, three are hired educators. As for the length of service, three participants have between 5 and 10 years and one has between 11 and 15 years of service. As for the weekly workload, one educator teaches 20 hours a week and 3 educators teach 15 hours a week. However, to complete the schedule, they work at the school until 1:15 pm, sometimes accompanying the children in their school lunch, sometimes helping other educators, when necessary.

The data collection technique used was the semi-structured interview survey (using the interview guide and audio recorder). In addition to this instrument, we also used documents, such as regulations from the macro level (Ministry of Education) and documents from the meso level, produced by schools. And the data were analyzed using content analysis because we realized “the interview method is always associated with content analysis” (Quivy & Campenhoudt, 2003, p. 195).

### 3. Results Presentation

Here we present the data and discuss the results obtained from the content analysis of the interviews.

Regarding the participants’ perspectives on curricular changes and their influences on curriculum management and learning assessment, most participants consider that there are significant changes in each curriculum and also declare that the previous curriculum granted more autonomy to educators: “in the previous curriculum, we created the study plan and prepared the observation or evaluation grid” (E1); the national curriculum and the session plan already have everything, the criteria and indicators are all there, the ministry of education offers us the session plan that contains all the activities, their development processes and their strategies” (E3). Even though the current curriculum has a more technical and prescriptive content, the respondents liked it:

“the change that exists is good” (E4); “because I no longer need to make an effort to create the session plan, everything is already prepared by the ministry of education” (E2). Most of the educators interviewed consider that the introduction of learning assessment modalities in the current curriculum is good, that the curriculum is centered on children’s learning and that they have changed their practices of assessment of learning in the classroom: “for me it is better...I still feel a little stiff, I think all this because I still haven’t gotten used to it”. Educators feel that the current curriculum “helps a lot in evaluating my children’s tasks and activities, also from my own practice” (E1); “I think that in terms of curriculum and assessment, the ministry of education is reducing our tasks. It helps us to develop our knowledge of modern methodology (E4). However, there are participants who feel that the current curriculum facilitates in some aspects, but makes it difficult in others: “yes, it changed my assessment practice, as we educators have to pay more attention to our children, I feel a little difficult in evaluating children. All activities have already been carried out by the Ministry of Education and therefore we carry out the ideas of others. It is not easy to develop those that are not ours” (E3).

Regarding the influence of regulations, that is, of the current curriculum in the practice of evaluating the learning of pre-school educators, all participants refer that the basic national curriculum, decree-law n.º 3/2015 and the plan sessions are important: they “have tips that guide us to assess and educate children” (E2); “I consider the regulations as a document and as a guide” (E3). Therefore, one of the participants considers that the current curriculum and the session plan put pressure on her in its implementation: “the present curriculum puts pressure on me because in it and in the session plan there are many recreational activities... session plan and there is more to play than to learn in it, I think you need to cut down on playing or playing times. So they can learn to read, write, that is, learn more about the subjects” (E4).

Regarding the participants’ perspectives on learning assessment practices, this objective has three subcategories, namely, the functions and modalities of assessment: perspectives of pre-school education educators; when it evaluates and; how it evaluates: the instruments used in the evaluation process.

Regarding the subcategory, the most used assessment functions and modalities, most participants report that they use more “formative assessment with informal methods” (E4); “because every day I have to assess the children’s development” (E1). In addition, they use the continuous assessment because they consider that the time “cannot be observed all the children in a single day” (E3); that’s why “I usually rotate. If today I do it for 1,2,3,4 and 5 children, then tomorrow I do it for the others (E2). When faced with the question when evaluating, the educators mention that they undertake to carry out a continuous evaluation “every day” (E3); “I do informal assessment of my children” (E4).

When questioning how they evaluate, educators say that to get to know children well, they evaluate them “through their activities: their developments, how they solve their own problems, their interactions, their presence in the classroom” ( E1) and; through your drawings. When faced with the question of which instruments are used in their practices, most reveal that they use “the observation grid, the attendance list” (E2) and; “the record book” (E4).

#### **4. Discussion**

Thus, in relation to the first objective: to know the curricular changes and their influence on the practice of pre-school education educators, we verified, through the analysis of the participants' speeches, that for most educators they consider that the curricular changes altered their practice of assess children and their own teaching

and learning strategy. Both the curriculum and the assessment of learning are child-centered, enabling the curriculum manager to pay more attention to the child, in the sense of carefully observing what the child is doing. It also allows them to develop their knowledge of modern methodologies, in accordance with what is prescribed by the Ministry of Education, especially in the session plan and in the national curriculum for pre-school education. Based on these speeches, we return to the preamble of DL no. 3/2015, which approves the basic national curriculum for pre-school education, which states that “pre-school education is of particular importance in the development of children, being its potential directly linked to a solid foundation in childhood and early years of education”. However, educators “accept the structure of the curriculum as it is presented to them, they accept the task they must perform” (Pacheco, 2001, p. 139) as a technician who is ready to perform his work effectively for children. Now, educators cannot just assume the role of reproducers of what is prescribed by the Ministry, it is necessary to participate and organize their own curriculum according to the real situation of the school and the “problems and attitudes” of the child that they encounter throughout the education process so that they can “learn to collaborate and change them” (ibid., p. 141).

Faced with the question of regulations, especially the present curriculum, most consider the curriculum positive. They consider it as a document that gives them tips, guides and as a guiding document, both to develop activities in the classroom and the practices of assessment of children's learning. However, some interviewee considers that the curriculum has an excess of recreational activities, which can harm the learning of the contents and leave the educator insecure to evaluate, as he does not have time to observe. This perspective is a traditionalist perspective, in which the main concern of the educator is to make children “able to acquire knowledge that allows them to integrate into active life. However, their role basically boils down to the memorization of the materials that are conveyed to them (...)” (Morgado, 2005, p. 37).

Regarding the second objective: to understand the learning assessment practices of preschool education educators, we asked educators about the assessment modalities that they frequently use in their classes, the participants mention that they use more formative assessment with informal methods to record all events and learning and “it is information that is essentially from observations and informal conversations” (Fernandes, 2008, p. 89).

When questioning educators about their pedagogical routine, what time they allocate to evaluation, we verified, through the analysis of the participants’ speeches, that they assume to carry out a continuous evaluation to collect information about the children’s development, so that they know them, either their skills and competencies, and their behaviors.

Regarding the instruments used in the evaluation process, the participants mention that to evaluate the children's participation, observation grids, attendance lists and a registration book are used. In fact, the most frequent assessment instruments are “(...) self-assessment, hetero-assessment and/portfolios grids” (Alves, 2004, p. 98). However, the portfolio is never referred to by these participants.

## 5. Final Considerations

Based on the analysis of the participants’ discourse, we believe that the current curriculum policy provides greater help to educators, as it recognizes their difficulties, both in science and in pedagogy.

On the other hand, we can see from the speeches of most participants that the current curriculum is prescriptive, which does not give more autonomy to educators, in the sense, they adapt to the context where they

perform their functions. In this case, we consider that, in order to have meaningful learning, an integral and harmonious formation of children, first of all, the national curriculum should give educators spaces of autonomy and greater flexibility, as well as giving the opportunity “to schools and teachers of build their curricular projects, based on local needs, according to national norms and guidelines” (Flores, Day & Viana, 2007, p. 9).

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