

# Strategies to Prevent Children from Dropping Out of School in the Lautem Municipality of Timor-Leste

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## Abstract

This research project aimed to gather data that could be used when developing strategies to prevent children from dropping out of a new school that is now under construction in a remote rural district of Timor-Leste. Twelve (12) people living in this district – three (3) teachers, three (3) parents and six (6) adults who dropped out of school when they were children – participated in this project by completing a questionnaire and later being interviewed about their experiences of children not completing their primary school courses.

The findings reveal a lengthy list of the difficulties that all children face in their daily lives in this district, including long distances from school, lack of transport, health issues related to poverty and malnutrition, family and cultural obligations, the need to earn money and a lack of support for education. When children eventually arrive at school, they find that conditions are not helping them to remain there and continue their learning. Schools lack facilities and are poorly maintained. Teachers need to be well-trained in modern methods of learning and teaching. The research concludes that strategies to prevent children from dropping out of school will require serious and sustained work to deal with the many existing difficulties by using partnerships and collaboration between families, schools, communities, government departments, government programs, donors, international agencies and churches.

**Keywords:** Strategies, Dropout, collaboration, partnerships

## 1. Introduction

In many countries, children drop out of school before completing their years of basic or compulsory education (USAID, 2014; USAID, 2015; Bergeson, 2005). Although the Constitution (2010) of *República Democrática de Timor-Leste* (RDTL) promises that every child will attend school free of charge (Article 59), many children in Timor-Leste still miss out on this opportunity for education for reasons further explored in the Literature Review (Lundahl and Sjöholm, 2005; The National Education Strategic Plan (NESP), 2011). The NESP (2011-2030) provides for financial support from both the Timor-Leste Government and the donors to fund programs in the educational sector (NESP, 2011). UNESCO (2017) has promised to conduct a policy dialogue with many interested government agencies, government programs and international organisations in order to reduce children's dropout rates by first improving the quality of education in the country.

The extensive research undertaken by USAID (2014 and 2015), UNESCO (2017), UNICEF (2020) and other organisations provides detailed statistical information on the problem of children not completing

their studies in Timor-Leste. Their reports are published in English and are mostly available online. However, since very few people in this remote\_rural area of the country speak or read English, this information is not widely disseminated or known. The people speak Fataluku, which is an oral language with, to date, no written alphabet in existence.

The significance of this study is that it was conducted in the Fataluku language. The participants, whose voices are rarely heard, were able to speak about the problem and how it affects their daily lives, their struggles to survive and their need to find hope. Because of my role as a community liaison officer, they knew me and felt quite relaxed in speaking to me. They were also re-assured by the presence of the translator who is fluent in Fataluku and Tetum. Fataluku is the language that will be used by children and teachers in the first classes at the school, following the language policy as described by Taylor-Leech (2012 and 2019) in the literature review below.

The main research questions are listed below.

**Question 1** aims to simply open the topic for discussion and then invite the participants to make any comments and general suggestions.

**Question 2** asks participants to specifically reflect on the role of families in supporting children in their efforts to go to school and complete their studies to at least the end of Grade 6. This question asks parents how they can take more responsibility for their children's education and explores reasons to do so.

**Question 3** is based on the assumption that partnerships between parents and teachers will be essential for the success of any child's education. Some parents will find such partnerships difficult to negotiate, as culturally there is a perceived power imbalance between teachers and subsistence farmers and poor fishers.

**Question 1.** What strategies do you suggest can be used to retain children who are at risk of dropping out of school?

**Question 2.** How can families support their children during the compulsory years of schooling?

**Question 3.** How can parents and families collaborate with schools in order to prevent children from dropping out?

## 2. Literature Review

Academics have researched this issue in a number of countries. Their articles tend to concentrate more on the problem than on solutions or strategies that are actually being used to address the problem (Álvarez-Blanco, Cao-Fernández, Iglesias-Muñiz, Martínez-González, Roussounidou and Symeou 2008; Dubeck, Jukes and Zuilkowski, 2016; Sheng, Sheng and Anderson, 2011; Beilmann, 2017; and Fortin, Marcotte, Potvin and Joly, 2006).

Research into the current situation of children in Timor-Leste was conducted by UNICEF in 2020. Researchers found that issues needing to be addressed in order to prevent children from dropping out of school included making sure that they begin school at the correct age, that they are ready for school, that they do not repeat classes and that they have good parental support. The major reasons given for dropping out of school, according to their research, included a "lack of interest (40%), the costs of continuing (20%), pregnancy (10%) and work or family duties (15%)" (World Bank, 2018, p. 61, as cited in UNICEF, 2020, p. 112).

Research by Komatsu (2019) produced many stories of Timor-Leste children who dropped out of school while the conflict with the Indonesian military was raging. Although the conflict ceased more than 20 years ago, poor infrastructure, limited health services and food insecurity all contribute to poverty, and

poverty leads to illness and early death among parents. Children then become guardians and providers for their siblings, causing many of them to drop out of school.

USAID (2014) sponsored a study entitled Timor-Leste situational analysis: Factors and conditions that affect dropout. Teachers, administrators, at-risk students, former students, parents and community supporters at 35 primary schools in the west of the country participated in this large research project. According to parents, students and former students who dropped out, the main reasons for children dropping out were “expenses, illness, family responsibilities, work and failures” (p. 21). According to education staff, the main risk factors included children being over-age and child marriage. Parents agreed that better quality education would be the best way to prevent children from leaving school early. Community members who had dropped out of school said that better family support would have prevented them from leaving school early. Although teachers gave support to students at risk of dropping out, very few parents or members of school support groups reported that they had participated in activities aimed at helping school and village communities to work together on “intervention strategies that would prevent this from happening” (p. 32).

Taylor-Leech (2012; 2019) found that many children in Timor-Leste drop out of school before Grade 2 due to long distances between home and school, safety issues, lack of Water, Sanitation, Hygiene (WASH) facilities and parents’ indifference to education. However, Taylor-Leech approves of the Mother Tongue-Based Multi-Lingual Education (MTB-MLE) policy of teaching children in their first language when they first attend school, as this is a “proven method of improving participation”, outcomes and retention rates in other countries (Taylor-Leech, 2012, p. 297).

Research by Ananga (2011), conducted in a rural setting in Ghana, presents valuable insights into the dropout problem. This rural setting shares many features with Lautem in Timor-Leste, including family poverty, people’s reliance on fishing and subsistence farming, infertile land, poor health facilities and public infrastructure, schools in a critical condition and children struggling to survive. Ananga (2011) lists late enrolment, irregular attendance and insecure relationships among the characteristics of children who dropped out of school and participated in interviews for his research. He also challenges the way that schools operate – the so-called “teacher factor” (p. 30), a derogatory term used to blame teachers who are the public face of the education system. He finds that communities are complicit in child labour practices that “compromise the retention” of children at risk of dropping out. He refers to three “pillars of retention” as strategies or interventions that ought to be used to address the problem: school-based monitoring of attendance and support; community monitoring of children not attending school; peer-teacher-family collaboration (Ananga, 2011, p. 46).

Timor-Leste education policy regarding the implementation of the 2014 National Curriculum requires teaching to be “student-centred” (not teacher-centred), in an “atmosphere full of love” (not fear), “democratic” (not authoritarian) and with “positive discipline” (not violence) (Freitas, 2014, p. 225).

Modern scholarship on teaching methodologies promotes “effective teaching and learning through the development of good relationships in a learning community” (Zajda, 2021, p. 14; Pope Francis, 2019). The constructivist approach sees students as active participants in experiential learning, rather than rote learning. Social interaction encourages “collaborative learning, rather than individual or competitive learning” (Zajda, 2021, p. 38; McLeod, 2004, p.117; Townsend and Bates, 2007, p. 124). Children’s education must be holistic, involving their social, cultural, cognitive and emotional development. It must affirm local cultures, while also challenging them to aim for higher goals beyond simply the preservation of the “status quo” (Zajda, 2021, p. 99).

According to USAID (2015, p. 144), in order to achieve their potential, children need to stay at school and complete their basic education. School communities and families can engage in the following actions in order to ensure their continued attendance:

**Action 1:** Create a “commission to oversee the participation of children” during their school years. This commission will work with the school staff or employees to identify children with irregular attendance.

**Action 2:** This commission will hold meetings with the community, “take care of school routine activities, listen to families when they speak about drop-out issues and maintain strong links with the school”.

### 3. Methodology

The methodology used in this research is a “mixed methods design” using both quantitative and qualitative data (Creswell, 2014, p. 564). The research uses “transformation designs” to respond to the hope that the school can bring changes (Creswell, 2014, p. 576). I was also guided by the idea of the “interpretative paradigm” that emphasizes the need to understand the deeper meanings of the respondents’ experience (Bogdan and Biklen, 2003; Eivers, Ryan and Brinkley, 2000, as cited in Simić and Krstić, 2017, p. 55; McChesney and Aldridge, 2019). Questionnaires were completed and one-on-one interviews were conducted with twelve (12) participants who live near the rural Primary School Centre, including teachers, parents and adults, who as former students did not complete their primary school studies.

I planned to obtain data about people’s attitudes, beliefs, opinions and practices. This study is about people’s lives and it asks the questions 'how, what, and why' (Yazan, 2015, p. 138; Yin, 2011, p. vii; Yin, 2009). The “mixed methods combined quantitative data from questionnaires with qualitative data from the interviews” (see Appendices) (Creswell, 2014, p. 566).

I recognized that this research needed to be guided by the ethical standards of the National Statement on Ethical Conduct in Human Research (NHMRC, 2018). I submitted my proposal to ACU and received approval (April 29, 2022) and approval from the ICFP (*Instituto Católico para a Formação de Professores*) research committee (April 29, 2022). I received permission to enter school premises from school directors, and I spoke to some teachers, parents and former students about participating in this research. I then invited participants to sign informed consent forms. Participants were aware that no material associated with this research would be released either online or in print. The names of the participants and their schools remain confidential. I used my mobile phone to record my interviews. All data collected is in Tetum and Fataluku. The data in Fataluku was firstly translated into Tetum. The final translation into English has been stored on my computer and is password protected (Seidman, 2013; Creswell, 2014). I expressed my thanks to the participants for agreeing to co-operate and for accepting the limitations on this research. They all expressed an interest in having a new school in the area and in helping to prevent children from dropping out of school.

#### 3.1. Methods

Firstly, a questionnaire was prepared containing ten (10) statements (see appendix 1) and participants were asked to mark the column that best represented their views (**1 = strongly disagree, 2 = disagree, 3 = agree and 4 = strongly agree**). These statements called for basic information from the participants on their views related to the compulsory completion of school from grades 1 to 9, the *merenda escolar* (school meal), the establishment of the school clinic, encouraging children to go to school, the partnership between parents and school, the creation of the school rules, and children’s participation in extracurricular activities such as: sports, music, dancing, and the church activities. The results from the

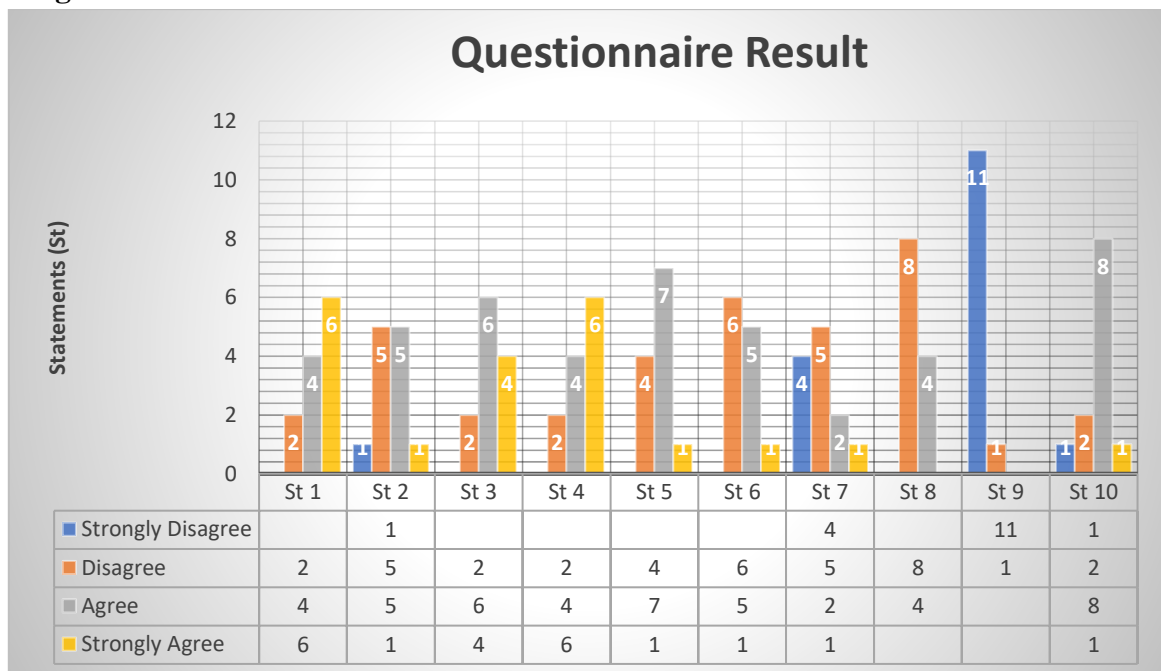
questionnaires were put into one document (see below in Findings) and analysed to identify issues where there was general agreement or where there was a level of disagreement that needed further discussion during the interviews that were scheduled for another date.

In the interviews I have used the three main research questions (listed above in the Introduction) as starting points for gathering qualitative data. Then I asked five special questions of the teachers. The teachers were very keen to speak with us, as they seemed to be grateful that people connected to the new school were interested in finding out about the problems that children face in this district. They showed great concern for the welfare of the children in their classes and helped them in small ways. Five separate questions were asked of parents, and different questions again for the adults who had dropped out of school when they were children (see Appendix 2).

It was important to include parents in this research as some of them are illiterate and very shy about having anything to do with schools. At first some were hesitant about sharing their true opinions instead of giving us answers that we wanted to hear. One parent was shaking and sweating before gaining his composure. Interviews lasted for almost an hour in some cases, as we needed to listen closely to people tell their own stories in Fataluku while they searched for the right words to use. There were times when no words were heard, thus we simply shared moments of silent sadness. The translator, who is also a teacher, would speak to me in Tetum with a summary of each section of the conversation which was then recorded on my mobile phone. Later I typed the English version of each section into my laptop. A sample of these typed sections is included in Appendix three (3).

Since the people of the district know me from my work as the community liaison person, I was able to persuade them that their participation in this research activity was valuable. However, one of the former students seemed to have unrealistic expectations of our intentions for conducting the interview with him. He was happy to give answers to our questions, as he initially believed that we were there to provide him with a solution to his lack of education. He was very sad after he learned that this was not our intention.

#### 4. Findings/Results



Graph 1 below shows results from the twelve participants: teachers, parents and former students.

#### 4.1. Graph 1: Explanation of Questionnaires Results

Statement number 1: **“All children must complete grades 1 to 9 at school”**. Six participants strongly agreed and four participants agreed. Two participants disagreed and no one strongly disagreed.

Statement number 2: **“Every child must receive a school lunch (*merenda-escolar*) at school”**. One participant strongly agreed and five participants agreed, five disagreed and one participant strongly disagreed.

Statement number 3: **“Parents must ensure that their children can travel safely to school”**. Four participants strongly agreed and six agreed. Only two participants disagreed and no one strongly disagreed.

Statement number 4: **“All family members must encourage children to go to school”**. Six participants strongly agreed and four agreed. Two participants disagreed and no one strongly disagreed.

Statement number 5: **“Teachers must create a strong partnership with families and visit the families of children in their class or small group”**. One participant strongly agreed and seven agreed. Four disagreed and no one strongly disagreed.

Statement number 6: **“Parents and family members will participate in school, religious, musical, sporting and cultural activities”**. One participant strongly agreed and five agreed. Six participants disagreed and no one strongly disagreed.

Statement number 7: **“Children from poor families will receive extra assistance from the community”**. One participant strongly agreed and two agreed, five disagreed and four strongly disagreed.

Statement number 8: **“All children with or without disabilities will be loved and well cared for by the community”**. No participant strongly agreed and only four participants agreed. However, eight participants disagreed and no one strongly disagreed.

Statement number 9: **“The community will provide first aid to the school clinic”**. No participants strongly agreed and agreed. One participant disagreed and eleven strongly disagreed.

Statement number 10: **“The families will contribute to making the school rules”**. One participant strongly agreed and eight agreed. Two participants disagreed and only one strongly disagreed.

#### 4.2. The Interviews with Teachers, Parents and Former Students

Teacher A is an experienced educator. He has worked in schools for more than 20 years as a teacher and a principal. He has recently returned to classroom teaching. Teachers B and C have 6 years of teaching experience. They are all fully aware of the difficulties children face in going to school.

“I know about the children’s world. Children leave home very early..... They do not have breakfast. There is no public transport in this region..... The distance is too much for many of them” (Teacher A).  
“Families have goats and buffaloes; children are expected to care for them instead of going to school” (Teacher C).

Some parents are illiterate. Some do not speak Tetum, so they stay away from the school.

“They do not organize their children to go to school” (Teacher B).

When children arrive at school, they find poor conditions that do not attract them to stay and learn.

“The school facilities all need repair. Often there are not enough desks and chairs..... We do not have libraries, meeting rooms, games, TVs or visual material..... The *merenda escolar* (school meal) is often not available” (Teacher A).

“Some teachers are rude to the children and hit them with sticks” (Teacher C).

“Lack of water and sanitation is a main issue at this school” (Teacher B).

Families and village communities struggle to provide the support that children need in order to succeed at school. They also struggle to deal with other influences.

“The village economies are weak and fragile. Many parents do not buy the things that schools ask children to bring..... Children use social media and parents do not know how to stop them..... The martial arts groups teach children how to fight and be angry..... they have too much influence on young people” (Teacher A).

“Every household spends money on traditional rituals and cultural ceremonies. Often education is not a priority” (Teacher B).

“As a father to them, I feel very ashamed and very helpless for not being able to send our two children to school” (Parent A).

“A life below the poverty line resulted in my daughter dropping out of school in grade 5 with a disability and caused my son also to drop out of school in grade 8” (Parent B).

“Lack of a clinic or first aid at school has caused me to quit from my study at grade 5” (Former Student C).

“I really want to go to school, but my parents don't have the money. How can they afford to buy me a uniform so I can go to school?” (Former students A and E).

“Until now I really want to go to school again, but what can I do, I do not fight the reality that happened to me” (Former students B and D).

The teachers had suggestions about ways to prevent children from dropping out of school.

“Schools have obligations to build cooperation with parents and children” (Teacher A).

“Teachers must become friends, brothers/sisters, fathers/mothers to the children so that they will feel the harmonious atmosphere” (Teachers B and C).

“Schools must provide a clinic, a daily meal and a dormitory for children who travel long distances” (Teachers A and C).

Parents and former students also made suggestions.

“As parents, we hope that the government will think about underprivileged people like us so that we can send our children to school like other children” (Parent A).

Further suggestions of actions that could be taken to prevent children dropping out included:

“Professional development for teachers on how to teach students with a disability ....and student-centred learning” (Teachers A, B and C).

“Community training of parents” (Teachers A, B, C; Parents A, C and Former students D, E).

“Parent-school partnerships to provide the *merenda escolar* (School meal) regularly...” (Teachers A and B).

## 5. Discussion

None of the Twelve (12) participants in this research had any experience of implementing any systematic strategies for preventing children from dropping out of school. The teachers noted that “schools warned them many times” (Teacher A) and “parents do not notice that their children are failing” (Teacher B). However, while expressing regret for these events, no further action was reported. This research provides evidence that in this rural area of Timor-Leste, and in other rural areas, people are aware of the problem, but they are so overwhelmed by other life issues that it is not regarded as a priority.

Valuable data has been collected in this research about the nature and the seriousness of issues including poverty, housing, distance from school, health services, food security, public infrastructure and

community building. It seems clear that any strategies to retain children in school must therefore be based around addressing these community issues.

While conducting this research, I am aware that my position as a community liaison officer may affect its objectivity. However, I am hoping that my inside knowledge of the community may be combined with research data to produce a clearer picture of the issues under discussion and further assist me in my efforts to help the community to develop appropriate strategies.

The community leaders who decided to ask for a school in their district wanted this project to be a sign and symbol of unity for all the residents. They are still recovering from generations of conflict between rival factions and families. They see the school as a new and permanent structure that everyone can look up to, an instrument that will motivate their people to come together with a common purpose and bring peace, harmony, development and joy into their lives. They have great confidence in their ability to achieve this outcome. Obviously, no one is going to help them if they are still fighting each other, so they also will welcome assistance from local and overseas organisations to facilitate a peaceful resolution to these conflicts.

Teacher B spoke about parents, veterans, teachers, the parish priest and others forming an association that would help children to remain at school. This idea is similar to the recommendation by Ananga (2011) for school-based monitoring, community involvement and teacher-family collaboration. USAID (2015) described such an association as a Commission. The community leaders are now persuading all citizens that they are valuable and they can contribute in some way to this project. Joining a group or an association such as this one, with encouragement from friends, would help participants learn new skills and develop some self-esteem from their service to the community.

One indication of a challenge that community leaders are facing is presented by the participants' reaction to Statement 9 in the Questionnaire. They were nearly all strongly opposed to the idea of the community being responsible for a health clinic at the school. No schools in this region have health clinics. Communities will gradually learn that health and education bring benefits, but also incur costs to be shared by all. I am fortunate that the community always welcomes me and we have spoken on friendly terms through an interpreter for the last few years. However, gradually we have begun to speak more seriously, trying to change attitudes, suggesting that new ideas be adopted and more responsibilities be given to the people, so that improvements can occur from within the community. Any changes must take place in a culturally sensitive way. This will be one of the many ongoing challenges that I will face in my role.

According to the responses to Statement 2 on the questionnaire, the participants are evenly divided on the need for the *merenda escolar*. Anyone who has visited a school in Timor-Leste knows how much children appreciate this mid-morning meal. It is therefore difficult to interpret this finding. The statement did not include who would be involved in providing this meal. Perhaps the opponents of the meal suspected that it would be yet another cost to the community which they can ill afford.

Responses to Statement 6 indicate that participants are evenly divided over the suggestion that parents should be part of the school's religious, musical, sporting or cultural activities. Such activities are normal occasions for schools to welcome visitors, allow children to dress in special costumes, display their talents and develop good working relationships with their communities. It is hard to imagine that anyone might have a negative view of them. Parents are always free to choose the level of participation that they consider appropriate for themselves. Clearly there is much work to be done in order to convince at least some people of the value of attending these events and the benefits to the wider community of the events themselves.



The responses to Statements 7 and 8 in the Questionnaire also pose some challenges. It might seem normal to expect that children would be loved and cared for by communities and that children from poor families might be given extra assistance. However, no one agreed strongly with these statements. It seems that the mention of children with disabilities or poor children could have revealed the presence of some feelings of discrimination among the people. However, without further research into this topic, I will not continue to discuss it or make judgements here.

Teachers A, B and C recognized the need for teachers at the new school to have professional development in the area of teaching children with a disability. This could easily be arranged in collaboration with ICFP Baucau. Graduates of ICFP have studied units in Inclusive Education and Teaching Children with a Disability. Some have undertaken research in this area for their Licenciatura (Fourth year of study).

Parents A, B and C and Former student A were concerned that poor children did not attend school or they dropped out because they could not afford uniforms. At the new school the children's uniforms could be gradually introduced as material becomes available and local weavers who have special skills can use their traditional looms and sewing machines to make them. Over time used uniforms could be shared as needed.

## 6. Conclusion and Recommendations

### 6.1. Conclusion

My research is limited because I gathered data from only twelve participants from the Lautem community (May 2022). However, the data gathered and analysed seem to indicate that there is insufficient awareness of the harm that children suffer when they drop out of school. Therefore, there is a resulting lack of urgency for action to be taken to address this problem. The teachers who were interviewed knew about the problem and its many causes, but they were not able to report on any success stories of intervention resulting in at-risk children remaining in school and completing their studies. The parents felt ashamed and disheartened, but they could not find enough money or practical ways of supporting their children's education. Five of the former students accepted their situation with many regrets, while only one still hoped that there would be opportunities to attend some kind of schooling.

The Government's services are quite limited in rural areas such as Lautem, but strenuous efforts must be made to implement Government policies in such areas. In fact, the NESP (2011-2030) gives instructions on how the education policy is to be enacted for all citizens in accordance with the national constitution (2010, article, 59). Education Departmental officers have a duty to ensure that all children attend school. Personnel from other departments including Social Welfare, Law and Justice, Community Health, Disability Services and National Development need to become involved in helping children to remain in school. None of the people interviewed mentioned the possibility of representatives of these departments offering assistance.

In Timor-Leste there are many internationally-funded programs that can mentor, monitor and assist schools (UNICEF, 2020, p. 62-64). Such programs include ALMA (*Apoio, Lideransa liu husi Mentoria no Aprendizajen*), HANDS (*Halimar Aprende no Deskobre Susesu*) and HATUTAN (*Hahan neebé Atu fo Tulun ho Nutrisaun no Edukasaun*). Their programs are part of an EMIS (Education Management Information System) that is concerned with the effectiveness of the strategies outlined in the NESP (2011-2030). Their target is to reach 100% of children so that everyone will be healthy, well-educated and safe and have their lives transformed by 2030 (NESP, 2011, p. 9).

The Timor-Leste government is not giving any assistance to the building of the new school or to its recurrent expenses. All the funds are coming from Australian donors. The buildings are designed to welcome children and parents with special places for gathering, playing and eating together. The buildings acknowledge the people's cultural identities, their traditions, beliefs and languages. In this way the school facilities will encourage learning and academic achievement (Rodriguez et al., 2004; McDonald, 2007; Huitt et al., 2009; Ligorio, 2010; Altugan, 2015, as cited in Zadja, 2021, p. 6). The school timetable will include time in the afternoons for sports, music, dancing, drama and for homework. This program recognises that children do not have opportunities for such activities at home. They do not have desks or chairs for study in their homes which are mostly small and the space is needed for many family members to sleep with their traditional mat and cardboard box on the floor.

It is encouraging to report that the serious work of engaging local people in this sign and symbol of unity has already begun with many people visiting the building site of the new school each day. Some are gaining work as labourers and project support staff, while others are discussing with the elders how to become involved in this new development in their community.

## 6.2. Recommendations

1. The new school will develop associations and partnerships with parents, local communities and leaders in order to ensure that all children attend school and remain for their compulsory years of education.
2. Government officials and representatives of departments and agencies mentioned in the Conclusion will be called upon to provide all the support required to achieve Recommendation 1.
3. On-going longitudinal research will be conducted into how the school is changing policies and behaviours towards Recommendation 1 so that all Timor-Leste people can learn lessons about this issue in their own languages in the future.

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**Appendices**

**Appendix – 1**

This Appendix contains the results from the Questionnaires Table 1.

This Table is followed by some of the interview questions.

I include some examples of the documentation that I created when conducting the interviews, and then translating summaries of the interviews into English.

Some of my observations about the interviews are also included.

**Questionnaires**  
**Table 1. Results Survey**

No.	Statement (St.)	1	2	3	4	Total
		Strongly Disagree	Disagree	Agree	Strongly Agree	
1	All children must complete grades 1 to 9 at school.		2	4	6	12
2	Every child must receive a school lunch ( <i>merenda-escolar</i> ) at school.	1	5	5	1	12
3	Parents must ensure that their children can travel safely to school.		2	6	4	12
4	All family members must encourage children to go to school.		2	4	6	12
5	Teachers must create a strong partnership with family and visit the families of children in their class or small group.		4	7	1	12
6	Parents and family members will participate in school, religious, musical, sporting and cultural activities.		6	5	1	12
7	Children from poor families will receive extra assistance from the community.	4	5	2	1	12
8	All children with or without disabilities will be loved and well cared for by the community.		8	4		12
9	The community will provide first aid to the school clinic.	11	1			12

10	The families will contribute to making the school rules.	1	2	8	1	12
<b>T o t a l</b>		<b>17</b>	<b>37</b>	<b>45</b>	<b>21</b>	<b>120</b>

## Appendix – 2

### Interview Questions for the Director and Teachers:

1. What strategies are used to engage children in the classroom?
2. What is the reaction of the parents when their children drop out of school?
3. What strategies can make children feel that school is a good place to be?
4. How strong is the relationship between teachers and parents at the school to prevent children dropping out from school?
5. What kind of policies, rules and practices can prevent children from dropping out from school?

### Interview Questions with Parents of Children who Dropped-out:

1. As parents, how do you feel when your children do not continue their study at primary school?
2. What is your understanding about school rules, policies, practices and systems implemented at that school which could have caused your children to drop out of school?
3. What is your knowledge about school conditions that impacted your child dropping out of school?
4. How is the relationship between you and the school?
5. What kind of support is there if your child intends to go back to school?

### Interview Questions for Children who Dropped-out / Former Students:

1. What are the reasons that made you decide to drop out of school?
2. Are there any problems with the conditions of the school that caused you to drop out from school?
3. Are your parents involved in the school?
4. What kind of security and health treatments were available in your previous school?
5. Do you still think about going back to school? Why, and why not?

## Appendix – 3

### Lautem School, 23/05/22

#### Summaries of Interviews translated into English:

##### A). Teacher A, B and C (Main points only)

These are the teachers including the director of the Lautem Primary School Centre responses to the interview questions below:

#### 1. What motivational strategies can engage children in the classroom in this school?

- Unfortunately, we do not have a very good resources for reading. We do not have a proper library and textbooks.
- Lack of communication amongst teacher and students.

The curriculum can be implemented based on the limited conditions that we have. The main issue that we face is the dropout problem.

- Insufficient family support and the distance of the school.
- The *Merenda Escolar* (school meal) is not permanently guaranteed.

- Lack of transportation to go to school (leaving 03.00 am to school and back home 08.00 pm). The children feel discouraged to continue their study. Every day they come late or do not appear at school.
- The one and half year COVID'19 pandemic caused many children to get married early.
- None of the parents cared about the school warnings related to their children's failures.
- Early marriage is a very common issue.
- Some children are struggling with their learning at school, teachers absent, lack of the school rules to control the children, some wealthy children intimidate the poorest children as well as bribing some teachers with money.
- The martial arts clubs' existence becomes intimidating, as they have a strong influence of some students.
- Social media also one of the issues that cause children to drop out from school; lack of control by the parents and teachers.
- The school's condition is also one factor that makes children uncomfortable in class and so they take themselves out of the schools, especially girls.
- Lack of good toilet system and lack of water and sanitation system, especially for girls.
- Children feel engaged in the classroom through teachers' approaches who listen to their problems and assist them in their difficulties.
- Children also can feel that the school environment is the place where they can express their ideas and get feedback from teachers.
- The rules of the school are set not for physical punishment but for care and love, so children can become more motivated.
- The teachers have to become friends, brothers/sisters, fathers/mothers and advisors for the children so that the classroom automatically develops a harmonious atmosphere. If this occurs, children can feel very happy to participate effectively in the classroom and will not think about leaving the school.

## **2. What is the reaction of the parents when their children drop out of school?**

- Most parents' first reaction is to become angry or aggressive. They begin to make complaints about some of the teachers in the school and do not accept the reality.
- Other parents even support their children being expelled because they are difficult to manage. They leave their children for the police to take care of their behavior.
- Some parents negotiate well with the school while agreeing to the circumstances experienced by their children.
- Some people admit their weaknesses as good parents to their children.
- Almost all parents accept the difficult situation with the economic problems and understand the dilemma of their children having to travel long distances to school.
- Parents do not notice any sign of their children failing and do not attend regular school activities.
- Parents feel confident that their children leave home early and go to school every day without any problem at all.
- Children decide to stay outside of the school while waiting for the school time to finish, then together with other colleagues they go back home, so parents are not aware that their children are absent from school.

- Many children decide to discontinue study because their parents cannot afford to keep children at school.
- Some children from the remote areas stay with families near the school but unfortunately these children are under pressure because they have to do work, to pay for their board, before going to school.
- They find it very difficult so they decide to leave the school, as they feel that lives are difficult with hard work when staying with aunts, uncles and/or other relatives.

### 3. What strategies can make children feel that school is a good place to be?

- The first thing we do is create a safe and welcoming atmosphere for all students.
- Create collaboration and partnership between teachers, parents and children.
- Create a strong relationship with the parents of the children.
- Create an atmosphere in the classroom so that students are the center of the learning process, not the teacher.
- Trying to keep the *merenda escolar* (school meal) running smoothly at school.
- Create an atmosphere of love and care for children.
- Extra-curricular activities must function such as sports, music, cultural activities in the church, as well as attending certain events in the area and competitions and in addition holding celebrations together as a sign of togetherness.
- All members have tried hard to communicate with the ministry of education to stop the number of children dropping out from school at Lautem primary school.
- We wrote proposals to the government in order to extend and provide libraries in the Primary school center.
- We also asked that the government to assist in providing merenda scolar with high nutrition food for the children's health.
- We talk to children's families about creating a parent association in order to respond to those children who really need help.
- This association aims to contribute money from each family \$1per/month with 500 students' families.
- This will also prevent children dropping out from school.
- The school plans to creates opportunities in the area of sports, music, singing, certain competitions amongst other schools and community engagement so that children can participate more in the extra-Curricular program and grow in pride of their school.
- This schools will also have strong networks with the parish activities so that every week parents, the veterans, teachers, other government institutions and parish the priest can call a meeting about all issues including the children's issues.

#### Unfortunately,

- Most parents have no education and are illiterate. They have poor health and live far from schools and villages.
- Parents want the best for their children but their condition does not allow them to fulfill their hopes and dreams.
- Sometimes people are more likely to spend money on traditional rituals than the success of their children which is a cultural failing across the country.



- Tradition and custom strongly influences them to marry off their daughters, who are still underage, for the sake of continuity of ties between families and the consequent bride price, rather than spending money to send their children to school.

#### **4. How strong is the relationship between teachers and parents at the school to prevent children dropping out from school?**

- Although the school can create many programs to stop children from dropping out of school, the bottom line is that the conditions experienced in this place are very harsh and primitive relative to that in the cities and larger villages.
- All problems must be resolved through new traditions involving churches, schools and laws.
- Tradition is only symbolized in traditional dress and dance, but the implementation of the norms is not what everyone wants.
- Change can happen if all parents have been educated and have knowledge. At least they should be able to write and read.
- Almost all schools in Timor-Leste have very strong cooperation between parents and schools through their children so that they can overcome the problem of children leaving school.
- In this area poverty and health problems are endemic.
- Poverty is very common in Timor-Leste especially in remote arid areas of Lautem. Every household is more likely to spend money on traditional house rituals and deceased families and cultural wedding ceremonies rather than spending it on their children for school.
- Some teachers who are rude punish children and make them kneel every time they come late to school and often use sticks to hit children. Children leave school because they are afraid.

#### **5. What kind of policies, rules and practices can prevent children from dropping out from school?**

- Timor-Leste's independence is now twenty years old, but from a political perspective in general the country is still not well governed or stabilized.
- The false promises of many politicians and parties not being implemented or put into practice.
- In fact, the condition of schools in rural areas, sub-districts, municipalities and in some urban areas is poor.
- The salaries of teachers do not meet their needs.
- Children have problems with diarrhea, fever, runny nose, blocked ears, lack of nutrition, lack of vitamins, weak immune system, stomach ulcers, emaciation, sore eyes, scabies, head lice, red eyes, festering wounds and skin issues. Schools need to have health clinics.
- Lack of water, sanitation and hygiene are main issues at the school.
- Children are not cared for properly, their appearance is messy, dirty clothes are still worn for a week, they rarely take a bath, rarely brush their teeth, rarely comb their hair and they have messy notebooks. Availability of water to homes is an issue.
- The school has toilets, but they are not well maintained and become dirty and smelly because there is no water to clean them. Many of the tables, black boards, desks and chairs are in poor condition or broken.

**The strategies and references to the new Marist school:**

Teachers A, B and C:

- ✓ Teachers must have quality education and understand effective teaching methods.
- ✓ Teachers must always have more many ways or plans every day to create a comfortable classroom atmosphere for children so that they follow each lesson well.
- ✓ The teachers must also implement student centred teaching.
- ✓ Teachers also have to get closer to the children in the class, especially those who really need help. Teachers are good role models and are also their parents and siblings in every school setting, when children need them.
- ✓ Teachers also have to find out about the difficult lives some children face.
- ✓ Teachers must be aware of the missionary nature of teaching in a Catholic school and accompany children in their spiritual journey as well as encouraging them to participate in church activities when appropriate and possible.
- ✓ The relationship between parents and teachers must always be constructive in terms of communication of important information about school activities, so that parents feel involved and engaged and are aware of their children's progress at school.
- ✓ Teachers must have compassion to accompany children with disabilities or special needs, so that these children can understand their world and join other children with the same dignity and worth in the eyes of God and the community in which they live.

**Summaries in English of main points from interviews with parents**

**Parents A, B and C:**

**1. As parents, how do you feel when your children do not continue their study at primary school?**

- As a parent I feel that I have failed in educating my child.
- What can I also do when children don't want to continue their schooling?
- I am not able to buy school necessities.
- Because life is very poor and I have no money.
- I am illiterate so I don't educate my children or keep them in school.
- Although I had hopes to change the future, but I failed.
- I am a sick person and get sick constantly and can't work so my wife sometimes sells vegetables.
- The proceeds from my sales are only for a day's meal.
- Even though I'm a construction worker, I'm still lacking as I do not earn much.
- Although I feel jealous of other people's children who are successful, the situation is not in my favour.
- The more I tried, the more frustrated I became.
- I only have hope to improve the lives of my grandchildren in the future.

**2. What is your understanding about school rules, policies, practices and systems implemented at that school which could have caused your children to drop out of school?**

- I'm have not studied and am illiterate, I don't know about the rules in school.
- Sometimes children take advantage of my innocence and illiteracy.
- This situation is a punishment for the life of a poor person like me.

- Even though there is a family relationship, they also have children; it's impossible for me to depend on them.
- What is on my mind is that my children obey the orders and school rules well.
- When they leave school I have a hunch that it's my children's fault or the school's fault? I am very confused.
- It's better to continue to be illiterate than to understand school rules and end up having a sudden stroke.

### **3. What is your knowledge about school conditions that impact your child dropping out from school?**

- I didn't have the guts to ask because I didn't understand about the school system.
- I send my son to school; he knows about what is going on at school.
- I don't even understand about knowledge or school systems.
- I am a parent who has money but my children do not want to use their future well.
- They are faced with a complicated situation because we live a long distance away from the school and the *merenda escolar* is not guaranteed.
- I attended a meeting at school but I only had one message for my children, to focus on studying, but in the end they dropped out.

### **4. How is your relationship between you and the school?**

- School relations with me are good but I rarely get accurate information.
- The teachers at school don't really care about people like me because we are poor and don't understand anything about the school system.
- Even though the relationship is good, the children who don't feel at home at school end up dropping out of school.
- Children carry messages that are always positive when in fact there are things that are not explained properly.
- I have always considered school as a place where I can find hope to change the future of my children.

### **5. What kind of support is there if your child intends to go back to school?**

- My child can take courses but going back to school is no longer possible.
- My grandchildren will not repeat the same problem dropping out of school in the future.
- If there is a technical school or job available, maybe I will support them to take technical courses or work.

### **Summaries in English of interviews with former students A, B, C, D, and E.**

#### **1. What are the reasons that made you decide to drop out of school?**

- Forced to leave school because the economic conditions and parents are not supportive
- The teacher was very strict and punished me so much that I didn't go to school
- I was concerned about the frequency of the sickness of my parents
- The distance between school and home is so far that I dropped out of school.
- Pregnancy and early marriage.
- Overwhelmed by a serious illness so stopped for treatment.
- Fear of gang threats and naughty children or being intimidated by martial arts groups.

- Often late for school.
  - There is no special transport for school children and public transport rarely passes so the daily walk to and from school was too much.
  - I helped selling things for my parents and finally forgot to go to school.
- 2. Are there any problems with the conditions of the school that caused you to drop out from school?**
- School conditions are messy and not well organized.
  - No supported libraries or resources.
  - There is no water that can be used to clean the toilet.
  - School buildings were destroyed, blackboards fell apart, chairs and desks were damaged and not repaired, teachers were sometimes late for school, schools were far from the city and thus government oversight, schools were not maintained properly, there was no security nor school cleaners.
  - There is no clinic in the school.
  - The *merenda escolar* is not always provided.
- 3. Are your parents involved in the school?**
- My parents rarely go to the school.
  - My parents are illiterate so they don't understand about the school program.
  - My parents are not interested in school business, they tend to think about projects and tenders.
  - My parents only get the last warning from the school when something has gone wrong.
  - Schools rarely inform parents about school programs.
- 4. What kind of security and health treatments were available in your previous school?**
- At my school there was no clinic or first aid for accidents or illness.
  - The teachers sometimes don't care about our health.
  - Teachers also sometimes separate us according to our status - they are closer to the rich than those of us who are poor and dirty.
  - The teacher cannot control our health, so sometimes the injuries or illnesses are severe and we have to quit school.
  - It seems that the teacher only thinks about the monthly salary.
  - Sometimes school directors or coordinators do not report to regional or national departments.
- 5. Do you still think about going back to school? Why, and why not?**
- I can't go back to school but I hope that the government fixes the problems that are happening to our area so it doesn't happen to other children.
  - Only if there were schools built in the future that could give hope and change these conditions.
  - As we know that the new Marist school has started with construction, that means our dream may come true.
  - The community at Lautem hopes that with this new Marist school our children's education will be brilliant.
  - We also hope that this new Marist School can create a school boarding house for the poor so that we get special attention.

- As former students and parents we can't afford to buy school uniforms for our children to go to school. If we can get the opportunity to send our children to school, we will be very happy, even though they only take vocational courses, we are proud.

### **The possible expectations:**

- ❖ My hope is that the presence of the new Marist School will bring changes to our poor lives and can change the lives of my children and grandchildren in the future through high quality education (Parent B).
- ❖ Things could change of course if the new Marist school has a lot of strategies to eliminate the rampant problem of possessions and those who consider early marriage can be guided through spirituality and education programs (Parent C).
- ❖ I hope there will be a change to my life so when I will get married my children's future will be bright and all will be well educated and succeed (Former student B).
- ❖ All students need proper treatment for their health condition. Not only the new Marist school but also the RDTL The ministry of health must take a role in education which can prevent this problem (Former student C).
- ❖ I expect that with the New Marist school, some bothers will have a spiritual approach so that many children will be safe and protected from evils of any temptations that might destroy children's lives (Former student D).
- ❖ Can the new school give hope to the community, especially those who really need help? (Former student E)

### **Interview Observations:**

- I called the principal to arrange a time to meet with me.
- I provided information letters and notification letters so that participants could be interviewed according to the interview schedule.
- I provided an interview schedule to the principal.
- I telephoned the participants who were already on the interview list.
- I discussed the date, time and place for the interview according to the proposal.
- The researcher provided an information letter and a consent form to sign before conducting the interview.
- The researcher drove a car to Lautem, about 100 km towards the east of Timor-Leste near to the coast.
- The researcher met with and briefed my translator who translated the interview results from Fataluku into Tetum. The translator is an experienced teacher.

### **The Interview process:**

- The first part was to interview the teachers including the principal.
- The second part was to interview parents of children who have dropped out of school.
- The third part was to interview adults who dropped out of school when they were children.

### **Feelings: Teacher A, B and C**

- ✓ One of them describes that a child who dropped out of school in great detail because he knows more about the circumstances and situations the Lautem community is facing.

- ✓ All were very happy when interviewed by the researcher.
- ✓ The director was eager to lead the researcher to meet the teachers who were on the list for an honest and open interview.
- ✓ All know of the children who have dropped out and their parents.
- ✓ One among them was hesitant and a little nervous.
- ✓ One of them felt confident in telling the situation that actually happened at the Lautem Primary School about children dropping out of school.
- ✓ All were very honest, generous and open.
- ✓ All were friendly and kind
- ✓ All were shy to provide information about the problems of dropouts.
- ✓ All were seeking the solutions to these problems through church assemblies and government educational institutions.

**Feelings and emotions displayed by Parents and Former Students as perceived by the researcher during the interviews.**

- Disappointed and regretful
- Useless and discouraged
- Disgruntled and guilty
- Hostile and hurting
- Inconsiderate and intolerant
- Pleased and supportive
- Happy to be heard and believed
- Contented and hopeful
- Pleased and delighted
- Excited and satisfied