

Multicultural Education in Burkina Faso: Analysis of a Textbook

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Abstract

This article discusses issues of multiculturalism in the educational system of Burkina Faso through a scrutiny of the fifth grade (CM2) textbook, one of the nationally-produced didactic material. Nationally-produced textbooks have only been adopted in Burkina Faso in the mid-1980s further to the event of the socialist regime that emphasized national self-reliance from 1983 to 1987. The main idea behind the adoption and implementation of those textbooks was their adaptation to local realities. In this paper, I interrogate the relevance of the fifth grade textbook with local realities and currently emerging issues. I stress specifically on issues of gender representation, student empowerment, and social and cultural relevance of the issues discussed in the textbook. I argue that the textbook needs to be readapted to the current global social and economic trends in order to prepare well-adjusted global citizens. I examine the extent to which gender and social equity are represented in the 5th grade textbook as well how the textbook empowers students or not.

Keywords: Multicultural education, textbooks, gender, empowerment

This article examines the extent to which 5th grade level textbooks in Burkina Faso address the needs of students and prepares them to navigate within the multicultural setting of the country. As it is the case with the other African countries that experienced European colonization, Burkina Faso, a multicultural country went through that dismissed local practices (viewed as inferior) and embraced the French ways of doing and seeing things, then promoted as superior, and fully adopted and disseminated.

Over half-a-century after independence, Burkina Faso is still attempting to challenge the assimilation policy through the several reforms that took place in the educational system. Thanks to those reforms, Burkina Faso was able to introduce locally produced textbooks in elementary schools

aiming at adapting school to the cultural realities of the country. Although those textbooks now address topics that are written by African authors including local teachers, they remain irrelevant to current social, cultural, and economic realities.

In this paper, I argue that the locally produced textbook in use in 5th grade fails to deal with topics that are source of empowerment for students and promote equity and equality in society. I address the following questions: How are gender and social class represented in the educational system in Burkina Faso? How does school empower students through the use of this textbook? I divide the paper into two sections which are: the historical background of the educational system in Burkina Faso and a discussion of the textbook.

1- Historical Background of the Educational System

Burkina Faso, previously called Upper Volta, is a landlocked country of West Africa. It was colonized by France and obtained political independence in 1960. The political independence that did not come along with economic autonomy certainly did affect the economic and social aspects of the country in a transformative way. According to the Human Development report (2013) Burkina Faso is one of the poorest countries in the continent as it is ranked 183 over 186 countries. The major challenges it faces are reflected by social indicators, including education and health.

Besides challenges related to curricula relevance, low enrollment figures remain a major concern. The UNDP reports over 36% of drop-out rate on average between 2002 and 2011, which constitutes a serious blow to an already weak national enrollment and literacy rate (28,7% adult literacy rate from 2005 to 2011). The lagging position of the country in the HDI reports are thus not surprising, education being a vital sector for the development and such an "inter-dependent variable which mutually reinforces other economic, social, and cultural development factors" (Ouane& Amon-Tanoh1990). In addition is the idea that schools are places where "cultural and economic capitals" are transmitted, as Apple (1995) supports. Put in a plain way, there is a tight relationship between education and manpower, which constitute a major factor to social and economic development. Thus, it is important for school curricula to be designed with a purpose of helping countries and their citizens reach social and economic development. As such, the elementary school textbooks in Burkina Faso attempted to focus on national cultural values in order to prepare students for adulthood responsibilities in the community.

The textbooks in use in elementary schools Burkina Faso, attempted to reclaim a national cultural identity and resist colonial domination. In fact, Johnson (1987) argues that Western education was used to exploit and oppress African people. Freire's (1989) develops the same argument and reports that, through colonial and neo-colonial practices, Western hegemony led to the oppression of the oppressed, here the people of Burkina Faso. In his argument, colonization distorts people's aspiration to being fully human and involves the nature of the relationship between the oppressor and the oppressed. He argues that the oppressed need to liberate themselves as well as the oppressor to achieve freedom and regain their cultural, political, and economic autonomy.

The implementation of locally produced textbooks could then be a hope that the country could achieve freedom through the reclaiming of its cultural identity. If the implementation of such textbooks was unsuccessful in secondary schools, it was successful in elementary school for decades. Those textbooks, however, present several issues that are going to be the focus of the next section.

2- Discussion of the Textbook

The book has 239 pages. It is divided into 12 themes and each theme has 9 short texts including a folktale and a poem all in French. Some of the texts are extracted from famous novels of francophone African writers such as AbdoulayeSadj, SembeneOusmane, CamaraLaye, AbdoulayeSadj and AhmadouKourouma, for obvious reason of the post-colonial appendage. The only Anglophone African text in the book is extracted from NgugiWaThiong'o's *Weep not child*". Several of the texts have also been authored by national teachers. It is however important to note that less than ten texts has been authored by female writers. According to a couple retired elementary school inspectors who were part of the committee in charge of putting the textbook together, the selection of texts from local teachers was made through competitions. Teachers were asked to suggest texts and the committee selected the most appropriate ones for the level of the book. The book covers themes related to schooling, family, games and feasting, health, hunting and fishing, professional skills, the seasons, etc.

2.1 The Textbook and Gender Representation

In a discussion about gender representation in African language textbooks, Schleicher & Hobson (2004) identify several criteria for gender under-representation in textbooks. Those are the number of male and female references, the number of male centered vs. female centered reading selection, occupations associated with female, and the re-enforcement of stereotypes. Based on those criteria, the textbook here discussed displays obvious signs of gender under-representation. For example, less than 10 texts are authored by women. Most of the readings are male centered. The very few times women are portrayed, they are represented as stay at home mothers taking care of the well-being of their families. The younger women are also depicted as students learning the skills of the household, or showing good behavior skills. Men on the other hand hold a central role in the texts. They are portrayed as teachers, blacksmiths, journalists, and carpenters. Besides, the students in formal schooling are mostly boys. For instance, in one of the texts, the teacher (male) and the students (males) are playing soccer. No mention is made of any female player. Another text describes a Koranic School, where the teacher (a male) physically corrects a student (a male) who is unable to recite the words of the Koran. No mention is made of the female student in any of the afford-mentioned examples or even in the whole book. The absence of any female character in the text regarding the Koranic School might be linked to the perception of women in Islam. According to Kusar, Meher-u-nisa, Rasaan, & Zahra (2002), although Islam gives equal rights and duties to women and men the "education of women is not felt necessary" (p. 1043).

Rifkin (1998) also discusses pictorial text as a criterion of gender representation. Pictorial texts are any illustration included in textbooks. Schleicher & Hobson observe that "a detailed analysis of pictorial text may evaluate a woman's position within a picture, the age of the woman, her role within the scene being portrayed"(p. 120). The pictures or photographs in the text book mostly show women at home or at the hospital. For instance, in one of the text, the mother is shown as being in charge of the family well-being. She cooks and takes care of her family. The picture shows her serving food for the men, those men being her husband, her son and the male employees of her husband. There are very few instances where boys and girls are shown on a picture doing the same things. In fact the only one illustration of both genders together is about a gardening class at school where the students were taught how to garden. The text does not make any mention gender. It uses the plural pronoun to refer to the students. Although the French personal pronouns have masculine (il, ils) and feminine (elle, elles) forms, as long as there a male (no matter his age) in a group of women, the correct plural pronoun would be the plural masculine form (ils). The use of that pronoun expresses the little to no attention given to gender differences in the book.

Apple (1989) denounces that gender has not been a center of attention when discussing the unequal relationships between society, teacher, and curriculum. He observes that the teaching position in the U.S has mostly been held by women. He also states that "Many of the reasons why textbooks look the way they do is deeply related not only to class, to the gender (and race) characteristics of the teachers for whom curriculum materials and textbooks are produced"(p. 9).

In Burkina Faso, however, a quick look at this text book reveals that this school material has been produced for male teachers. In fact, as discussed earlier, the use of the masculine pronoun to refer to the teacher as well as the portrayal of most of the students as male expresses the existence of a gender bias. Schleicher & Hobson (2004) define gender bias as "an inequitable distribution of female and male references within the body of a textbook, with females being under-represented and/or misrepresented"(p. 124). The mis/under –representation of women in the book marginalizes and subordinates the female gender as well as it reinforces stereotypes related to gender relationships in society (Schleicher & Hobson, 2004). It convinces the male students of their "supremacy" while downgrading the female students and assigns to them the traditional role of mother, cook, and care giver.

2.2. The Textbook and Student Empowerment

One of the themes discussed in the book relates to the story of a young boy, Fouroulou, whose dream is to pursue his studies in middle school thanks to a scholarship that he hoped to receive from the government. On the other hand, his father, a farmer attempts to convince him that farming is the best thing that can happen to him because schooling is for the rich. Besides, he is going to be more useful on the farms before he can migrate to France in a couple of years where his elementary school certificate is going to help him make a lot of money. But the same day, the boy

received a letter informing him that he has been awarded a scholarship to continue his schooling. The textbook also discusses unemployment, that of a young graduate who, unable to get a good job resolves to a very low paying one. Both these texts depict school as inaccessible to children with certain background. The father does not perceive the possible outcome of schooling in his own country. The only way it can be useful is through immigration. The text sends the message that schooling is unnecessary for farming. Years of schooling are useless and unnecessary if the likelihood is to end up in low paying jobs.

Another striking point of this book is that it is not updated to present realities. Journalism is the only modern employment it discusses. It also discusses carpentry, pottery, merchant, comedian, and farming. It depicts skills that are traditionally acquired through vocational training and makes little connection to formal education. Considering Apple's (1989) argument that there is a connection between school and economic, cultural and political power, the textbook contributes somehow in keeping the students whereby they cannot do better than artisanal jobs. It does not stimulate them into achieving better than being farmers, blacksmiths, and merchants and does not cultivate any form of ambition. The view of farming and other professional sectors in the textbooks are outdated since they can nowadays be rewarding if done in a systematic way rather than the ordinary approach that saw them as what people do when they have failed at school. School is even depicted as something they do not have access to, something that belongs to the rich, as Fouroulou's father believes it. It also proves to the students that even if they do get a chance to go to school, they might end up unemployed and obliged to take a low paying job. The only light it gave to education was through Fouroulou's hopes to attend middle school thanks to a government scholarship. But with the text about unemployment, the textbook seems to be admitting that Fouroulou's father is right to discourage him from going to school.

Another theme discussed is that of science –culture –progress. The author highlights the use of technology and science to improve communication, electricity, produce healthier water for consumption, etc. Though he acknowledges the benefit of such progress and wonders if the use of chemicals and more nuclear force really contributes to the happiness of humanity. The book goes on to discuss the work of a blacksmith, the use of an improved cooker that significantly reduces the use of wood, a visit of a textile industry, and a festival of African cinema organized every other year in Burkina Faso.

The text book is very rooted in traditional Africa and does not address the current realities of Africa in significant ways. It seemed to me that Africa in general and Burkina Faso in particular are being romanticized. It is an attempt to present traditional Africa and ignores that culture evolves. In fact, relying on Fouroulou and the unemployed educated men, I am tempted to admit that the focus on the local knowledge in this textbook looks more like "a third –rate education for the poor by confining them to their culture"(Lewandowski 2006: 8). I would like to note that I am an advocate of the use of local knowledge and culture in school. It is however important that the knowledge being used be empowering and a motivational factor for a better future. It seems to me that the book

is mostly presenting a one-sided knowledge, one that does not promise any bright outcome of schooling. It presents Africa as if it was that perfect place cut detached from the world and not undergoing any hardship. There is absolutely no mention of any issue existing in the country such as gender inequity, mortality rates, human right issues, etc.

In a discussion about multicultural education in the U.S, Nieto (2000) stresses the importance of teaching students about the different parts of the world. It is important that the text book be reviewed to include more empowering local readings and also knowledge from the different parts of the world. A monocultural curriculum, as Nieto discussed provides a narrowed view of the knowledge to students and limits their potentialities. Apple (1989) also supports that argument and highlights that "possibilities [for democratic future] must be grounded in an unromantic appraisal of circumstances in which we find ourselves"(p. 178).

2.3. The Textbook and Local Issues

In a discussion about textbooks in America, Loewen (1995) argues that textbooks "keep students in the dark about the nature of history"(p. 16). He observes that they have a desire to "promote inquiry and indoctrinate blind patriotism"(p. 14). In light of this argument the textbook in use the 5th grade in Burkina Faso is mostly promoting "blind patriotism". It is attempting to develop the students'awareness to their daily surroundings while ignoring that society changes. It posits teachers as men, women as caregivers or mothers. It overlooks the efforts that are being done both in the country and internationally to reduce gender discrimination. In fact, Lewandowski (2006) reports the initiation of the Ten-Year Basic Education Development Program (ProgrammeDecennal de Developpement de l'Education de Base PDDEB). She observes that one of the objectives of the program is to "expand basic education and reduce gender, regional and socio-economic disparities between pupils"(p. 5). My examination of this textbook did, however not allow me to perceive any attempt to reduce disparities.

Another sign of indoctrination or "blind patriotism" is the inability of the textbook to address aspects of the history of Burkina Faso that affected the country and contributed to giving it the shape it has today. It is for instance the case of colonization, post-colonial experiences and the political revolution. In a discussion about the nature of oppression, Freire (1989) views the conscientization of the oppressed people as a fundamental step towards liberation. He views the teacher as an agent of change who will develop students'awareness to social issues. Unfortunately a teaching material like this one is unlikely to ease the significant duty assigned to the teacher, considering the significant role of textbooks in instruction.

Freire also argues for libertarian pedagogy and emphasizes that "the oppressed unveil the – world of oppression and through the praxis commit themselves to its transformation. [...] This confrontation occurs through the change in the way the oppressed perceive the world of oppression."(p. 40) In light of this discussion, not addressing the issues will not lead to any transformation because the oppressed is not being exposed to the world of oppression. As a matter of fact, Grant (1999) discusses the low references to African Americans in American schools and notes that "for the students, this reinforced the idea that information about African Americans were unimportant in US society"(p. 160). The same argument might apply to the 5th grade students in Burkina Faso who might view their history or issues related to colonialism or social issues as unimportant. Such a reaction would unfortunately maintain them and the country in their state of oppression.

The textbook as it is designed seems like a description of what Freire (1989) has called the "banking concept of education" For Freire, the "banking concept of education" consists of storing information in the mind of the students, minimizing their creative power and facilitating their oppression. The textbook seems to be filling up the students with knowledge that is not always adapted to the changing realities of their surroundings and is keeping them unaware of very significant historical accounts that have modeled their environment. Such a textbook keeps the students in the state of mind of the oppressed and renders their quest for liberation difficult. It could also partially account for the state of dependence of countries like Burkina Faso on the West and its institutions, over 50 years after independence.

Conclusion

In conclusion, the reading textbook in use in Burkina Faso in the 5th grade presents several issues that can impede school achievement. It keeps women in the traditional role of mothers and care givers and does not offer the young girl a hint of a different role in society. It presents schooling as inaccessible to children of poor background and shows unemployment as its possible outcome. The textbook does not discuss issues relevant to the country in significant ways. The issues it presents are related to the climatic conditions of the country. No mention is made of the history of the country or to any burning political and social issues that can empower students and make them aware of their surroundings. It keeps students in their state of ignorance and dependence and is hence unlikely to lead to Freire's "liberatory education." Multicultural education seems to me to be an obvious step to reduce social inequalities, empower students, and shift from "baking education" to "problem solving education." Unfortunately, far from challenging social inequalities and addressing issues that are currently relevant national and global needs, the textbook maintains the students in the social and cultural setting of the early post-independence period.

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