



Burkina Faso: “Literacy for the Little Ones” in Nomgana

Nomgana is the hub community of a very active inter-village federation in the district of Loumbila, located 30 kilometers east of Ouagadougou, the capital of Burkina Faso. A local association dubbed Manegbzanga (“Development for All” in the Mooré language) was created in the region over a decade ago by the joint efforts of emigrants returning from neighboring Côte d’Ivoire and a local person who had gone to work for the Swiss NGO, Organisme Suisse d’Entraide Ouvrière (OSEO). In recent years, the association has launched an experimental program using Mooré language literacy as the basis for learning French. This has taken form over the past several years and gradually transformed itself into an alternative strategy of primary schooling.

From adult literacy to alternative schooling

The effort began, however, with adults. The Manegbzanga Association was confronted early on with the problem of equipping its members — many of whom had had limited or no schooling — to manage their own growing affairs and deal with suppliers of agricultural inputs and clients for their products in the vicinity of Ouagadougou. A person from the community who had become a civil servant and subsequently become field director for a Swiss NGO, began working with the villagers in

1988 to create an instructional system that would enable adults trained in literacy centers to advance from written Mooré to learning spoken and written French.

The program achieved a good deal of success and was soon faced with increasing demand for enrollment from young people — children and adolescents — who had missed primary schooling or had been forced to drop out. The village literacy committee decided at last to accept the challenge of creating a program of “literacy for the little ones” (*alphabétisation des tout petits*). The instructional strategy was developed with the assistance of linguists from the University of Ouagadougou. It proceeds from the acquisition of reading, writing and arithmetic skills in Mooré to learning French and study of the entire primary school curriculum. Participating children complete the equivalent of the

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primary school program in four years, instead of the six prescribed (and often exceeded, due to grade repetition). In addition, they acquire mastery of the written form of their own language.

“Our working hypothesis,” explains the professor of linguistics at the University of Ouagadougou, who helped develop the program, “is that knowledge of an African language and use of literacy in that language significantly facilitate acquisition of the skills that schooling is design— a shortening of the time required to complete the primary program, and an improvement in pass rates on the primary school certificate exams. But the program of the Nomgana centers was also developed with an eye to several other aspects of school quality. A systematic attempt was made to include both agricultural production activities and research into local culture in the curriculum, parents were given an especially active role in school management, and local “resource people” — artisans and griots (traditional historians and story tellers) in particular — were invited to teach classes.

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Catering to the leftover children

Teaching duties were assumed by previously unemployed young people of the locality who had at least partial secondary education, though no previous teaching experience. They were trained in the method by the supervisory staff from the University of Ouagadougou. Students were drawn essentially from the children of Nomgana and the neighboring village Goué who had never enrolled in the local primary school, generally because their families had chosen another sibling to attend. They were therefore well beyond the theoretical limit age for admission to primary schooling (7), averaging over 10 years of age at their entry into the program and, sociologically speaking, had been labeled “less likely to succeed.” The organizers made sure that an almost exactly equal number of girls and boys were admitted to the program. Overall, 55 children took part in the first cohort, divided into two classes, with a student-teacher ratio of 28:1. All were required as preparation to complete an accelerated (6 month) literacy course in the Mooré language.

The first two years of instruction were carried on in Mooré, though the French language was taught as a subject. By the third year, students were using the same French texts as their peers in formal primary education. In addition, they ran an animal farm which realized — in the 1997-1998 school year — net profits of 233,000 CFA francs (approximately \$425) and grew both peanuts and niébé (cowpeas) as part of their curriculum. There were no dropouts from the program, whereas the average rate of attrition between the first and last years of formal primary education in Burkina Faso is over 40 percent.

Surprising results

Tests administered in December 1996 both in the Mooré language school and in the neighboring primary school demonstrated that pupils at the center were ahead of those at the area’s formal primary school in French and mathematics, and had in addition, of course, a good mastery of the written form of their mother tongue. Interestingly, the level of achievement of the girls in the group (who comprised a slight majority) was well above that of the boys in the formal primary

school, though below that of boys in the experimental center. These results were further confirmed the following year when the first cohort from the Mooré language school sat for the primary school certificate. The success rates among the 53 students who took the exam was 53 percent (62 percent for the boys and 44 percent for the girls) compared to a national average of 42 percent for all formal primary schools in Burkina Faso (47 percent in the Oubritenga province) and a higher level of gender inequity.

While both the organizers and the community leaders are satisfied with the results of the program to date, they point out several handicaps created by their effort to conform to the formal primary school regime and ensure full equivalence with its diplomas.

- The rigidity of pre-established schedules and time allocations to different subject matters required for accreditation in the formal system worked against some of the most important things that the Nomgana center was experimenting — such as the inclusion of local materials and resource people in the curriculum, and direct involvement in farm work.
- Some of the content of French-language textbooks turned out to be quite inappropriate for use once translated into Mooré.
- To match the rhythm and requirements of the official curriculum — and to complete it in the reduced time allotted — the teaching staff had to largely abandon instruction directly in Mooré after the second year, despite the fact that some of the most encouraging learning results were appearing in classes taught in the mother tongue. In fact, in many cases, those students who did least well in the French-language portion of the curriculum and the subsequent certification tests turned out to be those who had not had sufficient “grounding” in Mooré literacy before enrolling.

Local endorsement

On the other hand, stakeholders were virtually unanimous that the effort had been successful where, for the time being, it counted most: in enabling “leftover” local children to gain formal certification while strengthening their capacities in

their own language and culture; and in demonstrating the viability and instructional worth of African-language approaches to learning French and to mastering primary school contents. The relatively favored circumstances of the experimental school must of course be kept in mind when comparing results from the two types of classes — particularly the adequate supply of instructional materials and the fact that none of the children attending came, as a proportion of those in rural primary schools generally do, from other communities or were forced to make a long daily commute on foot. But the difference in the two series of data, which in fact take no account of the locally focused curricula in which the alternative school excelled, at least strongly suggest that such methods can produce results at least on a par with current formal schooling.

The linguistics professor referred to earlier puts the matter succinctly: “We hope that this experiment will contribute to overcoming obstacles to the use of African languages in our education system, both as a means of shortening the duration and broadening access to primary schooling, and as a new bridge between formal and nonformal education.”

“At the same time,” he adds, “the experience can help us rethink ways of handling our multilingualism, one of the unavoidable realities of an African environment. Shortening the primary cycle leaves time for mastering and using a written national language in the school curriculum... Our languages have been quite simply the victim of prejudices ingrained by the colonial experience, (for) the opposition which some insist on drawing between African languages and French is finally pointless.”

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