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WHAT’S IN THE GAP AND WHAT’S IN A COPY?*
Local Practices and Discourses of Competency-Based Education Reform in Benin

Sarah Fichtner**

This article analyses the origins and understandings of competency-based education as a polysemous “tool kit” notion in internationalised education reform, its “travel” to Benin, and its negotiation through local actors’ practices and discourses. Based on three examples drawn from 11 months of ethnographic field research, it focuses on internal inconsistencies, and on the logics and efforts at work in the “gap” between a reform concept and teaching realities. The article deconstructs a seemingly coherent “global model”, as well as an apparently stable “local context”, and argues that the competency-based approach implemented in Benin is actually a copy-based approach, which should be seen not as a reform failure, but rather as a potentially necessary step in policy translation and appropriation.

Keywords: Competency-based approach, education reform, travelling policy, Benin.

INTRODUCTION

Competency-based approaches to teaching and learning have become central aspects of the internationalisation of education reforms, particularly in the past 15 years. Sharing the same origins as “objective-based” pedagogy, these approaches were first conceptualised for vocational training in North America in the late 1960s, based on Taylorist principles of the reorganisation of work and adequate methods to train for it (Bernard et al., 2007). Several countries and regions like the United States, Australia, Belgium, the United

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Kingdom, Switzerland and Quebec introduced them into general education programmes and particularly into primary education from the 1970s onwards (Amar Meziane, 2014; Boutin, 2004). Today, competency-based approaches differentiate themselves from behaviourism and, in most cases, from objectives-based education by referring to constructivist and cognitive notions of learning as grounded in experience and social interaction (Boutin, 2004; Cros et al., 2010).

The spread of competency-based approaches in the Global South – particularly in francophone Africa – has largely been supported by actors in international development aid, including the International Organisation of la Francophonie (OIF), Unicef and Unesco. In 1996, competency-based approaches were presented at the Conference of Education Ministers of French-speaking countries (Confemen) as an education reform which was likely to improve the quality of education in the context of Education for all, leading 23 francophone countries to consider its implementation (Bernard et al., 2007). Shortly thereafter, the OIF organised a series of seminars to train technical cadres in the concepts of competency-based reform in West and Central Africa under the auspices of international, notably Belgian and Canadian, experts (Roegiers, 2008; Pires-Ferreira, 2014). However, even as several African countries had been experimenting with these “travelling reforms” (Steiner-Khamsi, 2012) since the 1990s, they were being discussed critically and scrutinized by some of the pioneers in Quebec and Belgium (Boutin, 2004; Crahay, 2006; Hirtt, 2009).

A growing body of evaluations and studies have pointed out the problem of defining and finding a consensus on what competency (or “skill”)-based education actually is. Furthermore, they have shown the incomplete or, in more neutral terms, “selective” implementation of the reform – the gap between policy goals and realities – notably in African countries (Amar Meziane, 2014; Bernard et al., 2007; Cros et al., 2010; Lannoye, 2005; Lauwerier and Akkari, 2013). Yet, little attention has been paid so far to the concrete classroom activities in the context of this reform, i.e. to teachers’ practices 1 in the gap.

Based on 11 months of ethnographic research in a rural primary school in Benin, I intend to focus on the micro “politics of reform globalisation” (Lange, 2003): on school actors’ practices, references to, and arrangements with the gap, in order to understand what actually happens inside the gap as policy is practised (Levinson and Sutton, 2001). There is always a gap between a model and its application, especially in a field like education which is under permanent reform (Ball, 1998, Tyack and Cuban, 1995). The fact that reforms fail should not be surprising; the focus should rather be on the ways in which they work (Pressman and Wildavsky, 1984). The interesting question is how school actors

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1. One exception is Agbodjogbé et al.’s (2014) detailed study of a physical education lesson in Benin.
deal with reforms and their gaps, not only at the discursive level but in their practices: how do actors make sense of the contradictions that structure their everyday work?

With my analysis, I wish to move beyond the polarising view according to which there is a conflict between a global model and a local context. I will attempt to show that neither one of them is monolithic, as theories on the internationalisation of education policies – whether from a World Culture/neo-institutionalist perspective focusing on harmonious mimesis (Meyer and Ramirez, 2007) or from a World System point of view stressing power play and imposition (Arnow, 1980) – tend to suggest (Anderson-Levitt, 2003).

Drawing on three examples (a third-grade lesson, a peer-teacher training on free drawing, and a collective marking session of a mock exam), I argue that the polysemous travelling notion of competency-based education is practised as a copy-based approach in Benin. This practice is not presented as a strategy of resistance, but as one of coping. Without entering the debate on the general shortcomings of the competency-based approaches and its ideological neoliberal underpinnings (Boutin, 2004; Crahay, 2006; Hirtt, 2009), or discussing whether the reform presents an adequate tool in the Beninese context (Lauwerier et al., 2013; Yessoufou, 2014), I will consider whether the act of copying itself is a necessary step for the appropriation, translation and transformation of the concept. The contradictions which teachers face and handle could thus be seen as part of the reform process rather than as a failure, or as the “decoupling” between policy (institutional pressure) and classroom practice (Coburn, 2004). Before I discuss this argument based on my examples, I will introduce my research context, my methods, the ideology behind the competency-based approach, and the story of its “travel” to Benin.

The Where, When and How of My Research

The findings used in this article are part of a larger ethnographic case study focusing on the daily functioning of a rural primary school in a village in North-East Benin, which I will call Alafia. I consider ethnography not only as a specific methodological approach with a focus on long-term immersion in the field, detailed observation and conversation, but first and foremost as an epistemological stance; a “logic-in-use” (Green et al., 2012) which is abductive, recursive and iterative and which helps to translate the different points of view

2. For inspiring work on teachers’ creative approaches to making sense of reforms (based on the example of reading instruction in the United States), see Coburn, 2001 and 2004.
3. In 2013, there were approximately 1,175 inhabitants in the village, mostly Baatombu farmers living in the centre, but 4,757 Fulani cattle drovers were also included administratively in the surrounding area. The village school was officially created in 1989 with 43 pupils. In 2012/2013, it had six classes (of which five were authorised), 208 pupils and 5 teachers.
of those studied in order to bring to light explanations for “patterns of practice” (Agar, 2006; Green et al., 2012; Kalthoff, 1997; Woods, 1986).

School and classroom observations, conversations, and semi-directed interviews with the headmaster, teachers, pupils, parents, and local administration were conducted throughout the 2012-2013 school year and backed up by one month’s research in 2014. In addition, I carried out punctual observations and interviews at other public and private primary schools in the urban centre of the municipality to put my findings into perspective, and added observations during peer teacher training and collective grading sessions of final exams. My research on the pedagogical aspects of school life, which are at the centre of this paper, was furthermore informed by interviews with national and international education experts which I started carrying out in 2006 for my doctoral dissertation (Fichtner, 2012), and which I resumed between 2012 and 2014. Reviewing school books, reform programmes and evaluations was also part of my research project. As a single case study, this project does not intend to represent general patterns of policy implementation in Benin, but it is rather an in-depth account of some of its key actors (teachers) at the local level, proposing new hypotheses on how to understand the gap between policy and practice.

THE CONTEXT FOR THE REFORM IN BENIN

The first European-type schools created in the 1880s on the coastline of the Kingdom of Dahomey, i.e. on the territory of present-day Benin, were established by Portuguese missionaries but came under French rule shortly thereafter (Capelle, 1990). The school system followed the French model with an additional Cours d’initiation (CI), followed by the Cours préparatoire (CP), the Cours élémentaire niveau 1 and 2 (CE1 and CE2), the Cours moyen niveau 1 and 2 (CM1 and CM2), and the Certificat d’études primaires (CEP) final examination, which was abolished in France in 1989 but has been kept in Benin until now.

Several education reforms were launched after independence in 1960, the most important ones being the École nouvelle (New School), introduced in 1975 under the revolutionary Marxist-Leninist regime, and the Nouveaux programmes d’études (New Study Programmes) that followed a national conference which proclaimed the end of the Marxist-Leninist regime and a democratic renewal in February 1990. The École nouvelle of the Marxist-Leninist period aimed at the mass dissemination of basic education and at liberating Beninese citizens from the “yoke of colonialism”. The New Study Programmes were conceptualised to train a new type of citizen in schools responding to quantitative and qualitative standards, a citizen who could adapt to, and reproduce, the newly democratised liberal environment, and who would be able to be self-employed (Babagbeto, 2001). As Hountondji, the minister of Education at the time, said in his opening
speech at the National Conference on Education in October 1990 (République du Bénin, 1990):

« Le problème n° 1 de l’éducation dans notre pays, c’est que tout notre système scolaire avait été mis en place pour former des fonctionnaires, et qu’il faut aujourd’hui, face à la saturation de la fonction publique, mettre en place […] un système qui forme pour autre chose. Pour autre chose, c’est-à-dire forcément pour le secteur privé, […] pour l’auto-emploi, la création d’emplois, la capacité à s’installer à son propre compte et à générer, à l’occasion de nouvelles offres. »

The biggest financial and technical support (about $100 million) for this ambitious, market-oriented “educational adjustment” came from the United States Agency for International Development (Usaid), which had become involved in the former French colony for the first time and was eager to help with its political-economic reconstruction (Welmond, 2002).

Gross enrolment rates in primary education that had dropped from around 64% in 1985 to 51% in 1990 due to a political-economic crisis, employment freezes and parents’ loss of faith in the public education system rose steadily in the 1990s, reaching 81% in 2000 (Unesco Institute of Statistics website; Welmond, 2002). However, this quantitative progress did not go hand in hand with an improvement of educational quality – a fuzzy buzzword in aid talk that became popular at the end of the 1990s and was integrated as a goal in its own right into the Dakar Framework for Action at the World Education Forum in 2000 (Lauwerier and Akkari, 2013; Unesco, 2000). During interviews, education experts involved in the Beninese reform process further deplored the fact that growing enrolment rates had not had a positive impact on economic development, which was the primary problem the reforms were meant to address. One of the former leaders of the reform who was in charge of pedagogical aspects remembered: “We told ourselves over and over again that we had to stop training educated parrots (des perroquets savants) and start educating people who know how to do something with their hands. The Beninese talk too much! We have copied this from the French.”

As Beninese education experts were in search of inspiration for an education system that was not knowledge/content-based, but was aligned with the reformers’ objectives, they first turned towards Quebec and established an integrative objective-based curriculum, with the help of Canadian consultants (Labe, 2007). The 22 subjects formerly taught in Beninese primary schools were rearranged into six broad fields of instruction (scientific education and technology, social education, arts, physical education, mathematics, and French) to make learning more systematic and efficient (Chabot, 1996). However,

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4. Interview with M.C., 27.9.2014, Porto Novo transcribed and translated from French.
during the testing phase of this new approach between 1994 and 1998, reform leaders realised that their underlying concept was not holistic enough for their aspirations. They reasoned that the competency-based approach (“approche par compétences”), which was just starting to be promoted by the Confemen and Belgian experts, could be a better response to the perceived shortcomings of the Beninese system (République du Bénin, 2001). Some of the reform leaders were involved in consultancy projects with the Confemen and had attended professional training in Canada and Belgium; they were therefore “versed in the new developments in the field”\(^5\). Later, they gathered additional input from some of the leading “exporters” of competency-based and integrative pedagogy at the Bureau d’ingénierie en éducation et en formation (Biéf) in Louvain-la-Neuve, Belgium. While the New Study Programmes, which were generalised from 1999 onwards throughout the nation’s 4,500 or so primary schools, kept the objective approach for the first two years of schooling, the first trial of a competence-based approach in the third grade took place in 2001, placing Benin among the pioneers of competency-based education reform on the African continent (Roegiers, 2008).

This pioneering phase was anything but harmonious. Reform critics, most of them teachers belonging to the Communist Party and to the Beninese Trade Union Confederation (Confédération syndicale des travailleurs du Bénin), called for strike, demanding the “immediate suspension” of the New Study Programmes, which they perceived as being only inspired by foreign assistance and therefore, as “non-patriotic” (Fichtner, 2010; Yesso Fou, 2014). Most of the teachers I met however stated that there were not any more “New Study problems” (a word play in reference to the New Study Programmes) nowadays, owing to the numerous training sessions that helped incorporate the new approaches into teaching practices.

As has been noted by a number of authors, competency-based education is a complex term used as an umbrella/toolkit notion for varying pedagogical projects promoted worldwide by different think tanks and donor organisations (Boutin, 2004; Cros et al., 2010; Lauwerier and Akkari, 2013; Pires-Ferreira, 2014; Roegiers, 2008). Yesso Fou (2014) differentiates, for example, between the “skills” version of the competency-based approach, emphasizing “the acquisition of know-how and procedural skills”, the “standards approach” which “defines a set of generic standards which learners are expected to attain across school subjects”, and the “pedagogy of integration” which underlines the “integration of knowledge contents across school subjects”. Yet, this differentiation is inclusive rather than exclusive, giving the impression that competency-based approaches are, in most cases, a blend of different strands and their corresponding – and

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\(^5\) « Au parfum des avancées qu’il y avait dans ce domaine », interview with F.L., 16.2.2007, Porto Novo.
conflicting – foundations in constructivist and behaviourist philosophy (Boutin, 2004).6

Proponents of the competency-based approach in Benin adhere to the three strands mentioned above. They claim that the approach places the pupil’s intellectual, methodological and social competences, i.e. abilities/skills to act, rather than the teacher’s objectives at the centre of the learning process, based on insights from socio-constructivist and cognitive pedagogical theories as opposed to behaviourist models (République du Bénin, 2001). Pupil group work is emphasised over ex-cathedra teaching, and the pupil becomes actively involved in a process of learning by doing, constructing, combining and using new knowledge guided by the teacher as a facilitator (Babagbeto, 2001). Linkages between the different fields of instruction arranged around problematic learning situations aim at strengthening not only pupils’ disciplinary competencies, but also the mobilisation of transdisciplinary and cross-curricular “life skills” (Labe, 2007; République du Bénin, 2001). Hence, when teachers introduce a new subject, they are expected to invent a problematic initial situation to check pupils’ existing knowledge and to link it to the new topic. To understand how this is done in class, and how it is interpreted by Beninese teachers, I will give an example of a typical third-grade lesson that I observed in the Alafia primary school7.

WHAT’S IN THE GAP? CLASSROOM OBSERVATIONS

The third-grade teacher is a young man who left school with a middle-school diploma and worked as an untrained community teacher paid by parents for two years before he entered the state contract system in 2008. Since then, he took part in training sessions on the competency-based approach which he found convincing in theory, but rather difficult to apply in practice. He showed me his preparation sheet, a form which teachers have to fill in and hand in to the headmaster for approval before carrying out their lessons.

The title of the day’s lesson in French (oral communication) was: “I discuss the advantages of vaccination with my classmates”. I told the teacher that this seemed to be a perfect tie-in to the nurse’s visit some days before, who told the children about an upcoming vaccination campaign against meningitis. The teacher answered, resignedly: “Well, it could be, but the children cannot speak any French. They should discuss their experiences with each other, but they can’t. I’ll be the only one talking, as usual...” Benin used to be a French colony

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6. For studies on different variations of competency-based reforms in francophone Africa see Cros et al., 2010; Roegiers, 2008. In Anglophone African countries, competency-based education is often reduced to a selective “add-on”, referring for instance to the development of “life skills” or to learner-centred pedagogy (Bernard et al., 2007).

and French remains the official language and the language of instruction in schools. French, however, is not Beninese pupils’ mother tongue and it is rarely spoken in their families. Depending on what is classified as a language, there are about 50 different languages spoken in Benin.

The teacher stared at his preparation sheet and, inspired by my comment, quickly changed the initial situation to introduce the subject. He said: “A few days ago, a woman with a big motorbike came to visit our school. What did she talk about?” A pupil answered: “The sickness of the throat.” The teacher continued: “And what do we need to do to protect ourselves against this disease?” Pupil: “We will get a shot”. Teacher: “Is ‘shot’ what you should say? The right word is va-cci... and all the pupils said the last syllable in chorus: ...nation!”

Teacher: “Today we will talk about the advantages of vaccination. Open your books to page 15 and look at the picture. Describe what you see to your group mates.” There was a moment of silence. The pupils stared at their books. The teacher realised that the group assignment did not work as he had expected. He asked for individual answers. “I see mama and papa getting vaccinated,” one pupil said. The teacher was not fully satisfied with the answer and described the picture as follows: “There is one child who is crying because he is afraid that vaccination will hurt. He wants to go home. The other child wants to convince the first one that getting vaccinated is a good thing. In the background, we can see doctors who are vaccinating the people from the village. Now, you will enact this situation.”

He called two pupils to the front of the classroom. The first one was supposed to say: “A vaccination team has arrived; I will go home.” The second one was to answer: “No! You have to get vaccinated so that you do not get sick!” The pupils tried to enact the role play, but they had trouble remembering the lines; they giggled. The teacher played the part of one of the two children and showed how it was supposed to be done. Other pupils took their turn as well. The lines they said remained exactly the same.

Following the tripartite procedure of teaching-learning-evaluation (enseignement-apprentissage-évaluation) laid out on his preparation sheet, the teacher finally asked the class: “What should we keep in mind? Vaccination is a...?” The pupils finished his sentence in chorus: “Vaccination is a good thing!” The teacher wrote the key phrases of the lesson on the blackboard: “I keep in mind: Vaccination is a good thing. I should not run away from a vaccination campaign. Getting vaccinated protects against diseases.”

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8. The language question has been a highly contested feature of every education reform in Benin (Chabi Imorou, 2010). For experiences with alternative, bilingual education programs in Burkina Faso, which recently inspired similar attempts in Benin, see Trudell, 2012.

9. A group is made up of 6-9 pupils whose desks face each other in a U-shape. This seating arrangement was introduced with the competency-based approach to facilitate group work.
Similar key sentences appeared in every lesson. They were copied and learned by heart by the pupils. The monthly evaluations were based on being familiar with these messages, which were meant, in this case, not only to provide the pupils with new vocabulary in French but also, following the integrative and competence-based ambition of the curriculum, knowledge on health issues (scientific education), a moral content (social education), and practical skills to be re-enacted in a given situation (life skills). While the pupils copied the sentences from the blackboard, the teacher told me: “You know, when you are in bigger towns, there’s no problem with this group work. You give them the subject and they discuss it. But here in the village it is very difficult. You have to say everything!”

He reminded us that the content, rigorously copied by the pupils, was actually conceptualised as a means to develop their competencies in oral communication in French, using “activating” methods. Although he managed to introduce the subject with a stimulating initial situation, linking it to the pupils’ experiences and knowledge base, he failed, from his own point of view, in making the class talk about it and in using their competencies. He saw gaps between the ideal lesson he had planned and the actual lesson in the classroom. The main reason which he identified for this failure was the pupils’ insufficient ability to speak French, *i.e.* a technical problem, meaning that teachers in rural areas in particular are penalised by the difficult demands of the approach. This opinion is widely shared among Beninese educators (Lauwerier *et al.*, 2013).

However, the French-speaking abilities of primary-school pupils in larger towns and cities in Benin is not automatically greater than that of pupils in villages. The differences largely depend on: a) pupils’ pre-school experience (non-existent in many villages and not affordable for all town parents); b) parents’ commitment to practising French with their children or to hiring a tutor (*i.e.* instruction time at home); and c) the possibility to practise speaking French in class (not always possible as there can be up to a 100 pupils in one class in larger towns and cities, and communication is not encouraged by teachers).

In most public schools, in villages and in towns, pupils do not practise expressing themselves freely because teachers assume that they will be unable to do so and because it would be a very time-consuming activity for the teacher. Instead, pupils learn by heart, recite and copy what the teachers tell them to, like in the role play described above. This can be seen as a legacy of the French education system introduced in Benin by Christian missionaries from the 1880s onwards; it is a system which is mainly teacher-centred (a centredness co-constructed by pupils’ expectations, as explained by Tabulawa, 2013) and values memorisation as one of the key competencies learned at school. According to Beninese headmasters and teachers, memorisation and recitation (and thus, copying and imitating) are essential abilities that should not be forgotten in
favour of group work, role plays and other pedagogical techniques introduced with the New Study Programmes. Practising “free” oral communication in group work and role play situations is unquestionably hindered by pupils’ insufficient language skills, but it seems that it is also not sufficiently valued by teachers and parents to be encouraged for its own sake, even when exercised in local languages.

Tabulawa (2013) argues that we have to look beyond the “dominant technicist approach” which considers that the failure to implement learner-centred pedagogy in African countries is merely due to technical obstacles such as language deficiencies insufficient material and teacher training, high teacher-pupil ratios etc. He points out the need to focus rather on the “socio-cultural [and institutional] explanation[s] for the ‘tissue rejection’ of pedagogic reform proposals” (Tabulawa, 2013). Teachers trained in a teacher-centred system, and pupils brought up in a socio-cultural context that does not favour children’s initiative to speak up have tremendous difficulties to construct a learner-centred environment. This point was stated very clearly by the head of the Basic Education Team at Usaid, the main funder of the Beninese reform in the 1990s/2000s: “You’re giving them a system that is asking them to think in a very different way, okay? It’s child-centred rather than teacher-centred [...] they want them to take on a completely new way of thinking, which by the way is against the traditional view of the child. The child was never thought of as a thinking, proactive being, right?”

The headmaster of a private primary school in the municipal centre of my research area put it differently. “Out of a 100 teachers, you will hardly find 40 who can understand and carry out a learner-centred and competency-based approach in Benin”, he said. “To be able to do so”, he continued, “you have to change your beliefs and recognise that a five-year-old child can actually teach something to a 70-year-old grandfather”. However, his own “changed belief” and that of the 40% of teachers whom he defines as “capable” show a changing and disharmonious socio-cultural context that is not well represented by the image of the “tissue rejection” put forth by Tabulawa. Socio-cultural factors, norms and understanding matter, but they are not a cemented structure to which all sorts of innovations have to be adapted; the actual innovation happens in the translation and appropriation process. Most teachers in Benin do not reject and resist the competency-based approach any more. As “agents of change”, they seek to understand, manage and adapt, and are often aware of the difficulties and inconsistencies that the implementation of the reform entails. “Children should have a well-formed rather than a well-filled brain” is a saying inspired by the French philosopher Montaigne which is often mentioned and which

10. Interview with C.T., 8.3.2006, Cotonou.
Beninese teachers copy and learn by heart in teacher-training colleges – and they believe it to be true. Still, most teachers find it impossible to teach in a constructivist, brain-forming way, without filling brains first. Peer teacher training units represent a particularly interesting arena to observe the way teachers collectively make sense of the reform (Coburn, 2001).

DISCUSSING THE GAP IN PEER TEACHER TRAINING UNITS

The peer teacher training units (“unités pédagogiques”) are composed of the teaching staff of at least two schools that are located close to each other. Unit members meet twice a month for half a day at one of the member schools to exchange ideas on a demonstration lesson prepared in advance by one of the members, following a schedule proposed by the local school district administration.

The Alafia school belongs to a teacher training unit composed of six rural schools. The following analysis is based on observations in December 2012 of a demonstration lesson on “free drawing”. The teacher leading the lesson asked the 22 sixth graders what they do to decorate their classroom. “We draw” was the correct answer provided by one of them. The teacher pinned three posters to the blackboard, showing a yam root, a blouse, and a comb. He asked the pupils to describe the objects and to select one of them for their drawing. They copied the images rigorously. They were asked to show their work to their classmates, to compare and to evaluate them, explaining why one was nicer than the other. The drawings that most resembled the original posters were considered the best.

The members of the training unit went to the classroom next door to discuss their observations. The main debate revolved around the question of whether “free drawing” implied using model images or not. One headmaster said that the demonstrating teacher had actually given a lesson on “drawing on sight” (“dessin à vue”), i.e. reproducing a visible image, and not free drawing. He also criticised the teacher for having the pupils evaluate each other. He argued that this is not something you should do when pupils are supposed to draw a picture of their choosing, as such pictures cannot be compared. There was much confusion among the people present. Another school headmaster pointed out that pupils cannot be allowed to choose completely freely what they want to draw since they would come up with wrong (i.e. unrealistic) images, like “a person whose feet you can see behind the closed door of a car”.

What is the “right” degree of liberty in art education? Should pupils be completely free in their choice of object, free in choosing from a predefined selection, or free in their adaptation? One teacher told the story of a child who once showed him a drawing of a person in a bottle, closed with a stone. When asked to explain this, the child said that his father was always beating his mother...
at home and that he wished he could lock him up in his liquor bottle. The child had transformed his anger and frustration into creativity. “This is why we need to ask pupils what they want to express with their drawings”, he concluded. However, doing this demands a certain amount of flexibility, something that is not necessarily valued in an uncertain, over-reformed environment, among teachers who prefer to stick as closely as possible to their handbooks and preparation sheets (Anderson-Levitt and Bayero Diallo, 2003).

To inform the debate, the chair of the training unit suggested looking at the teacher handbook reminding the teachers that it is not prescriptive, but only indicative. The handbook states that, in the initial situation, the teacher may present some objects to his pupils to stimulate their imagination, but that these objects should disappear during the realisation phase. The handbook differentiates between free drawing, systematic drawing (when one object is given), and drawing on sight (with a choice of objects). The official programme does not specify which drawing category should be used, which is why many teachers tend to choose systematic drawing by default (the most popular object being the satchel which is often on the final exam), when they teach drawing at all.

Like the example of the third-grade lesson described above, the case of the peer teacher training session shows how Beninese teachers constantly question the appropriate degree and applicability of teacher-centredness versus learner-centredness in their pedagogical practice. Moreover, they question the value of free expression versus copying in their educational “output”, or in more general terms the conflict between competences of reproduction and construction. In my final example, I will continue to analyse this conflict – and the production of a shared understanding of how to deal with it – based on observations from collective exam marking.

CORRECTING THE GAP? EXAM MARKING SESSIONS

Examinations, especially the final primary-school exam which allows pupils to move on to secondary school, were omnipresent in the conversations with my informants. Important lessons and useful knowledge were defined based on whether they would be needed to pass the final exams, whatever their social value or the marketable “life skills” they contained (Boutin, 2004; Lauwerier and Akkari, 2013). The headmaster in Alafia, for example, stopped sending his eldest daughter to one of the best private schools in the urban centre of the municipality because she studied too many time-consuming subjects (such as Spanish and music) which he considered irrelevant for passing the middle-school exam. In addition, physical education and art were often considered as “leisure time” by teachers, subjects which did not demand any specific training to pass the
exam, and could easily be replaced by the seemingly more important exercise of copying notes from the blackboard at the end of the day.

To better prepare sixth graders for their exam, two mock exams organised by the local school administration take place at the end of April and in May each year. I observed a collective marking session for one of these tests in the urban centre of the municipality in April 2013. I asked the teachers to explain how they marked the exam papers, which dealt with reading comprehension in French. Showing me a spreadsheet with the right answers and a marking key, they said that the first step was counting the number of lines in the pupils’ summaries of the text they had to read. The great majority had written more than ten lines and thus earned the maximum number of points (four), but many had just copied sentences from the original text. Some of them combined words in sentences that did not make sense, but this did not matter; they got the four points for the number of lines, not for the content.

According to the teachers, the pupils did not seem to have understood the text. Instead of answering the comprehension questions, they had, once again, copied sentences, hoping that the right answer was hiding inside these lines. Even in the case of incorrect answers, they got some points for effort, in line with the new “no zero” credo among educators: Every attempted answer deserved 0.25 points, even if it was the wrong answer to a multiple choice question\(^\text{11}\).

Later, teachers debated whether they should give the maximum number of points to a pupil who wrote the name of the former president Kérékou with an “l” instead of an “r”, knowing that there is no difference between these two letters in Baatonum, the local language. “But the language of instruction is French”, one of them said. “Right, but you have to put yourself in the child’s position”, another replied. They eventually decided that they should not be too strict; the marking should be “learner-centred” after all.

This example is a further illustration of several difficulties that Beninese teachers have to deal with under the current reform programme, the gaps between policy theory, talk, and practice. In addition to the question, which was already touched upon, of what is considered as the “relevant” knowledge and competencies which children should learn in primary school, and the appropriate methods to teach them, teachers face the related problem of how to assess their pupils’ performance, straddling what is teachable, what is measurable and what is useful. Free expression, as has been shown in the discussion during the peer teacher training, is difficult to evaluate. A copy can easily be compared to its original. However, an exam that values pupils’ reproductive rather than constructive abilities is in conflict with the socio-constructivist principles behind

\(^{11}\) This has also been noted by Raminoharimalala (2010) as a marking practice introduced with the competency-based approach in Madagascar schools.
the competency-based approach. A technical advisor for pedagogical affairs at the Beninese Ministry of Primary Education referred to this situation as “pedagogical hypocrisy”. “We have never evaluated pupils’ competencies systematically. We have always focused on the reproduction of knowledge. [...] We have always pretended that this is the competency-based approach, that we teach a lot of things and not only facts, but we evaluate only facts.” And as the example of the exam marking shows, the fact-based learning used for exam preparations is not necessarily linked to an understanding of the subject, leading to copy-and-paste and trial-and-error answering tactics.

This “policy contradiction”, noticed by a number of researchers (see, among others, Boutin, 2004; Tabulawa, 2013), is even more complicated in the Beninese case, where the knowledge-based exam is linked to a learner-centred evaluation process (Kpogodo, 2011). Effort and form are highly valued and errors should be considered as positive steps in the learning process. The actual appropriation of the subject matter that goes beyond the reproduction of answers learned by heart or copied from the exam sheet is considered as a “criterion of perfection”, not as a “minimum criterion” necessary to pass the test.

Despite the “generous” marking practice of the “no zero” policy, the test scores on the final primary-school exam have been so low in recent years that the Ministry of Education “adapted” them ex post. This was done, according to my informants, to avoid the Ministry “losing face” in front of the numerous international technical and financial partners which have actively supported the Beninese education system since its democratic and competency-based renewal (Lauwerier et al., 2013). Instead of needing 10 out of 20 points in at least six of the eight main subjects tested (reading comprehension, written expression, mathematics, social education, science and technology, plastic arts, presenting arts, and physical education), pupils could pass with 10 out of 20 in four of the eight subjects, leading to national success rates of 86% in 2013 and 89% in 2014.

This strategic move was appreciated by some headmasters and teachers, who knew that good exam rates would have a positive influence on their career opportunities. Others decried the initiative as giving in to the international competitive pressure for efficiency, while shifting the problem of educational quality from the primary to the secondary sector. Others yet argued that the whole debate on competencies to be learned and evaluated in primary schools was misleading: in fact, teachers had to establish a knowledge base in primary schools, filling heads first, before they could be “formed” with know-how and life skills in collège (middle school) (Boutin, 2004). This argument, the classroom practices observed in Alafia, the teachers’ debates around the concept of free drawing, and their evaluation process during the mock exams, suggest that the

12. Interview with F. H., 4.2.2013, Porto Novo.
copy-based approach in Benin should not be considered as a mere failure of the competency-based model. Rather than juxtaposing reform policy and practices, the focus should be on what happens inside the gap, and copying should be considered as a necessary step in the process of creating something different, something new for pupils, educators, and policy makers.

CONCLUSION

My analysis of the negotiation and appropriation of the competency-based approach to education in Beninese school actors’ practices and discourses points out the internal inconsistencies, logics and efforts at work in this example of the internationalisation of teaching and learning concepts, instead of opposing a seemingly coherent “global model” to a seemingly stable “local context”. Competency-based education appears as a polysemous term used for a variety of educational projects by different think tanks and donor organisations. However, this export triumph is not necessarily based on success stories in its “source” countries, but rather on its “frameability” as a marketable, promising tool for democratisation processes, economic growth and quality education, related in particular to its claim to connect knowledge and know-how in schools in order to produce creative, self-employable citizens.

While the Beninese government bought into this promise when orienting its education system towards the competency-based approach, my fieldwork examples show that this coupling faces problems in practice and that the competency-based approach performed in Benin rather resembles a copy-based approach: to align the amalgam of a competency-based curriculum with learner-centred methods in an authoritarian, teacher-centred environment while preparing pupils for a knowledge-based exam, teachers tend to copy the form and structure of competency-based education, and pupils copy the content of what they are supposed to reproduce in tests. These practices are not presented as teachers’ strategies to challenge the reform – teachers who do not want to train “parrots” – but as arrangements, combining “old”, valued memorisation techniques with new contents and skills. Classroom practices therefore cannot be separated from the reform environment; the latter is filtered through teachers’ pre-existing beliefs and procedures (Coburn, 2004).

I suggest that it is the act of copying itself that constitutes a necessary step for the appropriation, translation and transformation of the reform model and that the contradictions teachers face and discuss should be seen as part of the reform process, as the policy-shaping “tinkering towards Utopia” (Tyack and Cuban, 1995), not as its failure. This thesis needs, however, to be confirmed in the long run and with a larger sample of ethnographic school studies. Revealing the multiple reform logics, the ways institutions cope, and the patterns of practice
at work will help us to gain a more nuanced understanding of the construction, use and functioning of the “globalised localisms” (Bartlett and Vavrus, 2014) which education reforms such as the competency-based approach represent.

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