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## From global advocacy to local resistance. Benin's experience of competency-based school curriculum

*ZEP : Zeitschrift für internationale Bildungsforschung und Entwicklungspädagogik 37 (2014) 2, S. 14-21*



Empfohlene Zitierung/ Suggested Citation:

Yessoufou, Akimi: From global advocacy to local resistance. Benin's experience of competency-based school curriculum - In: ZEP : Zeitschrift für internationale Bildungsforschung und Entwicklungspädagogik 37 (2014) 2, S. 14-21 - URN: urn:nbn:de:0111-pedocs-120913

in Kooperation mit / in cooperation with:

**ZEP** Zeitschrift für internationale Bildungsforschung  
und Entwicklungspädagogik

"Gesellschaft für interkulturelle Bildungsforschung und Entwicklungspädagogik e.V."

<http://www.uni-bamberg.de/allgpaed/zep-zeitschrift-fuer-internationale-bildungsforschung-und-entwicklungspaedagogik/profil>

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Diese Ausgabe der ZEP widmet sich dem Thema „Internationalisierung von Bildung“ und damit Fragestellungen, die den Brückenschlag zwischen Bildungsfragen in unterschiedlichen Regionen dieser Welt wagen.

Zunächst wird in das Heft mit einem historischen Beitrag eingeführt. *Volker Lenhart* bringt mit seinem Beitrag einen der ersten transnationalen komparatistischen Texte in Erinnerung, die Schrift von Friedrich August Hecht zum Thema „De re scholastica Anglica cum Germania comparata“ (Über das englische Schulwesen im Vergleich zum deutschen), die eine der ersten Arbeiten überhaupt zur Komparatistik darstellt. Transnationalität zeigt sich hier – ähnlich wie in manchen heutigen Globalisierungsdiskursen, so möchte man meinen – hinsichtlich der bildungspolitischen Wirksamkeit transnationaler Herrschaftsfamilien, die europäische Bedeutung der lateinischen Sprache und des humanistischen Bildungskanons. Dieser Text hat auch für heute eine überraschende Aktualität, wenn man statt der Herrscherfamilie die OECD, statt dem Latein die englische Sprache und anstelle des humanistischen Bildungskanons die Kompetenzdebatte mitliest. Ein Schlüsseltext der komparatistischen Pädagogik, der auch heute noch interessant ist.

Im nachfolgenden Beitrag steht ein internationales transnationales Studienprogramm im Mittelpunkt. *Thomas Prescher* beschreibt ein Fernstudienangebot der Technischen Universität Kaiserslautern zum Thema „Schulmanagement“, das in Eritrea angeboten wird. Hier zeigen sich interessante Perspektiven für die Transnationalisierung von Bildungsräumen und die Internationalisierung von Bildung im Hinblick auf Herausforderungen in der schulischen Weiterbildung.

Die folgenden zwei Beiträge sind je einer Länderstudie gewidmet, in der es jeweils um Fragen der Implementierung globaler Trends geht. *Akimi Yessoufou* diskutiert die Entwicklungen und Veränderungen in der Einführung kompetenzorientierter Curricula, wie sie jetzt auch in Subsahara-Afrika sukzessive eingeführt werden. Seine Studie zeigt anhand von Interviews mit Lehrkräften und Eltern, an welchen Stellen und mit welchen Argumenten die Reform positiv wahrgenommen wird, an welchen Stellen und mit welchen Argumenten sich aber auch Widerstand dagegen formiert. Diese Studie trägt zum Verständnis curriculärer Implementationsvorgänge in Ländern des Südens bei und weist damit weit über das in dieser Fallstudie thematisierte Land Benin hinaus. Der Beitrag von *Vassilios Pantazis* und *Vassilios Charitos* ist der Implementierung von

Themen interkultureller Bildung in das Curriculum der Lehrerbildung in Griechenland gewidmet. Sie können zeigen, dass Studierende diese Themen intensiver wünschen, als sie bisher angeboten werden und sich an dieser Stelle offensichtlicher Reformbedarf zeigt.

Der abschließende Beitrag von *Ulrich Klemm* nimmt ganz aktuell die Ergebnisse der internationalen Vergleichsstudie zur Erwachsenenbildung PIAAC in den Blick. Auch in dieser Vergleichsstudie zeigen sich ähnliche Herausforderungen im Hinblick auf Chancengerechtigkeit, wie schon die schulbezogenen Studien der OECD für Deutschland festgestellt haben. Diese Studie dürfte nicht nur in Deutschland, sondern auch im internationalen Kontext wichtige Impulse für die Weiterentwicklung der Erwachsenenbildung geben.

*Wie immer finden Sie in diesem Heft auch weiterführende Informationen, Tagungsberichte und interessante Rezensionen. Wir wünschen Ihnen eine gute Lektüre!*

*Annette Scheunpflug*  
Bamberg, Juli 2014

### Impressum

ZEP – Zeitschrift für internationale Bildungsforschung und Entwicklungspädagogik  
ISSN 1434-4688

### Herausgeber:

Gesellschaft für interkulturelle Bildungsforschung und Entwicklungspädagogik e.V. und KommEnt

### Schriftleitung:

Annette Scheunpflug/Claudia Bergmüller

### Redaktionsanschrift:

ZEP-Redaktion, Lehrstuhl Allgemeine Pädagogik, Markusplatz 3, 96047 Bamberg

### Verlag:

Waxmann Verlag GmbH, Steinfurter Straße 555, 48159 Münster, Tel.: 0251/26 50 40  
E-Mail: info@waxmann.com

### Redaktion:

Barbara Asbrand, Claudia Bergmüller, Hans Bühler, Asit Datta, Julia Franz, Norbert Frieters-Reermann, Heidi Grobbauer (Österreich), Helmuth Hartmeyer (Österreich), Susanne Höck, Karola Hoffmann, Ulrich Klemm, Gregor Lang-Wojtasik, Sarah Lange, Volker Lenhart, Claudia Lohrenscheit, Bernd Overwien, Marco Rieckmann, Annette Scheunpflug, Birgit Schößwender, Klaus Seitz, Susanne Timm, Rudolf Tippelt

### Technische Redaktion:

Sabine Lang (verantwortlich) 0951/863-1832, Sarah Lange (Rezensionen), Markus Ziebarth (Infos)

### Anzeigenverwaltung:

 Waxmann Verlag GmbH, Martina Kaluza: kaluza@waxmann.com

### Abbildungen:

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### Titelbild:

 Lupe Erde, © JiSign, www.fotolia.com

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# ZEP

Zeitschrift für internationale Bildungsforschung  
und Entwicklungspädagogik

Mit: Mitteilungen der DGfE-Kommission  
Vergleichende und Internationale  
Erziehungswissenschaft

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Akimi Yessoufou

# From Global Advocacy to Local Resistance: Benin's Experience of Competency-based School Curriculum

## Zusammenfassung

Im Zuge der „Education for All“-Kampagne, den Zugang zu Bildung voranzutreiben, kam es in vielen frankophonen Ländern Sub-Sahara Afrikas zu einer Welle von Curriculumreformen gemäß eines kompetenzbasierten Ansatz – so auch in Benin. Die dargestellte Studie dokumentiert verschiedene Wechselwirkungen zwischen den lokalen Akteuren und der Umsetzung der Reformen im Laufe der Zeit. Sekundärdatenanalyse kombiniert mit qualitativen Forschungsmethoden wie halbstrukturierten Interviews mit Lehrkräften und Fokusgruppendifkussionen mit Eltern erlauben es, Veränderungsmuster, Herausforderungen und Widerstände in Bezug auf die Reformen zu analysieren. Das herausgearbeitete Reaktionsspektrum der Akteure zeigt zwei übergeordnete Handlungsmuster: Befürwortung und Widerstand. Die Befürwortung der lokalen Akteure spiegelt den internationalen optimistischen Diskurs über Bildung wider. Die Widerstandspositionen werden gespeist von enttäuschenden politischen Ergebnissen sowie kontextbedingten Einschränkungen und Zwängen.

**Schlüsselworte:** *Qualitative Forschung, Bildungssystem in Benin, Kompetenzbasierter Ansatz, Schulcurriculum*

## Abstract

In the vein of the “Education for All” campaign to promote access to education, a wave of curriculum revision along the competency-based approach has swept francophone countries in sub-Saharan Africa, thus Benin. The current study documents local actors' various interactions with the curricular reform in the course of its implementation. Secondary data supplemented with qualitative research techniques such as semi-structured interviews with teachers, and focus group discussions with parents enable to relate the patterns of change, the challenges and resistance to change. The actors spectrum generated illustrates advocacy on one hand and resistance on the other. Advocacy of local actors reflects the global optimistic discourse on education and resistance is favoured by disappointing policy outcomes as well as contextual constraints.

**Keywords:** *Qualitative Research, Benin Education, Competency-based Approach, School Curriculum*

## Introduction

Since the 1990 Jomtien Conference on Education for All (EFA), basic education in developing countries has attracted growing attention. In sub-Saharan Africa, curriculum revision is one of the major policy measures to improve educational quality (cf. Chisholm/Leyendecker 2008, p. 199). A curricular paradigm emerged that values the philosophy of constructivism, cross-disciplinary arrangements and learner-centred strategies. The innovation took the form of competency-based approach (CBA) in many Francophone countries. Whereas the global community credits the CBA with innumerable potentials and promotes its development through technical and financial assistance, its introduction arouses resistance of school-level actors like parents and teacher unions. This paper examines a policy debate occasioned by the implementation of the global curricular paradigm in a context of profound structural changes in Benin.

Combining retrospective analysis with various qualitative research techniques, the study found policy advocacy to reflect the global discourse on the unlimited potentials of the CBA whereas a combination of contextual constraints, disappointing outcomes and the contagion effect of organized movements fuel resistance. The empirical findings enable to argue that grassroots actors' ownership and adaptation of planned measures are instrumental for effective implementation of school curriculum.

After linking the neoliberal agenda of education reform to the wave of school curriculum revisions on the continent, the study focuses on the specific case of the CBA in Benin. Subsequent sections include a summary of the methodology, the key findings in terms of the actors spectrum followed by discussions.

## A Neoliberal Agenda of Curriculum Revision

Neoliberal supremacy, celebrated in Fukuyama (1992) as ‘The Worldwide Liberal Revolution’, has variably marked educational development across the world since 1990. Developing countries in particular remain permeable to global influences as they highly depend on foreign assistance. The presence of external actors with greater material and conceptual capacity to set agendas renders the policy landscape of less developed countries more penetrable to innovations (cf. Rose 2007). In the field of education, schooling changed from being perceived as a ‘public good’ to become a ‘global good’ (Bierschenk 2007, p. 271). Various reforms that barely hide their neoliberal orientation pervaded the

field with a two-pronged effect. First, global forces spearheaded by the World Bank and a multiplicity of development agencies encouraged decision-makers to liberalize the education sector, limiting the role of governments. Following the logic that 'the market, and the market alone rules' (Thurrow 1996, p. 1), neo-liberalism redefined the role of government in social welfare provision, shifting the state from being a 'welfare state' to an 'enabling state' (Gilbert 2002, p. 43, in Jakobi 2009, p. 59). Second, neo-liberal supremacy questions the economic utility of school curricula. States are thus encouraged to implement curricular reforms that enable students to be so competitive in the job market as to fully participate in the knowledge economy. The ideal underpinning this curricular revolution is to direct the youth to seek jobs in the private sector rather than in the public realm. Rooted in human capital theory, this perspective holds that 'each nation's primary assets will be its citizens' skills and insights' (Reich 1991, p. 3). Highlighting the instrumental role of education in the knowledge economy, the World Bank explicitly mentioned that '[a] knowledge-based economy relies primarily on the use of ideas rather than physical abilities and on the application of technology ... Equipping people to deal with these demands requires a new model of education and training' (World Bank 2003, p. xvii, in Spring 2008, p. 337–338). To this respect, the CBA has been discursively constructed in terms of equipping future generations with life skills or core competences that would enable them to bring about significant socio-economic transformations.

### **'Unbounded' Potentials of the Competency-based Curricular Paradigm**

The CBA has gained currency in general education since the 1990s. Owing to its relevance in vocational training, the approach is credited by scholars for its transformative power (cf. Roegiers 2000; cf. Jonnaert et al. 2007). Epistemologically, the concept 'competence' is misleading due to the multiplicity of its connotations in the field of education. The skills approach theorists label CBA a process that emphasizes the acquisition of know-how and procedural skills by learners; the standards approach theorists call CBA an initiative that defines a set of generic standards which learners are expected to attain across school subjects. More scholars converge on a third conceptualization known as the pedagogy of integration. This trend constitutes the fastest growing CBA that inspires curricular reforms in most French speaking countries. Basically, the approach innovates by providing a catalyst for bridging the gap between school and society on one hand and by placing the learner in the heart of school systems. Constructivism, integration of knowledge contents across school subjects and cognitive science are its major sources of inspiration. The CBA distances itself from behavioural objective-based curriculum and teacher-expert pedagogy. Rather, it emphasizes contextualization of teaching-learning-assessment relationships by evoking 'complex situations' that call for learners to mobilize cognitive, affective and psychomotor resources to solve situation-specific problems (cf. Roegiers 2010, p. 75–81).

Despite this conceptual debate, international development agencies such as UNDP, UNESCO, World Bank, UNICEF and USAID endorsed this approach for its transformative potential; the CBA is believed to help school systems contribute to the attainment of global targets such as poverty reduction for example. Hence the 1990s saw the approach emerge as a catalyst for

curriculum development in general education in a significant number of countries across the world, notably in Francophone Africa. In 1996 for instance, a Conference of Education Ministers in Francophone Countries (CONFEMEN) summit in Yaoundé (Cameroon) explicitly urged member countries to undertake curricular reforms following the CBA (cf. Bernard et al. 2007, p. 557). Consequently the organization undertook to assist curricular reforms in 23 countries.

An important force driving global advocacy of the CBA is its perceived potential to groom children to become autonomous, competitive in the job market, self-dependent, democratic citizens and economically productive so as to generate growth. School systems in Tunisia, Djibouti, Morocco, Senegal, Côte d'Ivoire, Cameroon, Mauritania, Madagascar and Gabon are referenced for producing unprecedented results with the novel curricular approach (cf. Roegiers 2010, p. 159–65). The global advocacy makes some of these curricular reforms reliant on foreign aid in the form of financial and technical assistance, as will be illustrated with the instrumental role of USAID and other global actors in the case of Benin.

### **Methodology**

The research followed a qualitative design with intensive fieldwork in four of the 85 school districts in Benin between October 2008 and August 2009. Based on the presupposition that actors in school districts with higher performance indicators would be more favourable to the innovation than those in less performing districts, the study relied on 2006 educational statistics to purposefully sample school districts and, within each district, individual schools, using aggregate promotion and repetition rates. Seventeen schools in urban and rural constituencies including public, private and religious schools were included in the sample.

Data collection techniques consisted of in-depth semi-structured interviews with 49 teachers and their supervisors, supplemented with 17 focus-group discussions that gathered 246 parents. Direct observations as well as key informants provided opportunities to assess the data and validate emerging trends. The study also relied on secondary data generated by official institutions. Using the technique of analytic induction as developed in Ragin (1994, p. 93–8) and de Vaus (2007, p. 263–66), the study organized the empirical data into an actors spectrum, in an attempt to account for the patterns of similarities and differences in local actors' interactions with the reform.

### **Benin and the Political Economy of the NPE<sup>1</sup> Reform**

The Republic of Benin is a West African country of 114,763 km<sup>2</sup> and a population of 8,177,000 in 2007; 17 per cent of which are primary school-age children (Pôle de Dakar 2007). Benin is a low-income country, ranking 163<sup>rd</sup> on the UNDP's Human Development Index list of 177 countries in 2007 (ibid.).

Since independence from French colonization in 1960, political instability marked the country's political economy until 1972 when the military seized power and maintained stability for almost two decades. Since 1990 Benin has been a multiparty democracy after peacefully ending an 18-year military dictatorship inspired by Marxism-Leninism. Although the different arms of government (executive, legislature and judiciary) function relatively well based on the principle of separation of powers, the

country has experienced serious threats to civil liberties and fair elections.). The 2003 education law sets the age limit for primary education from age six to eleven. A national examination confirms satisfactory completion of the six-year primary education cycle. Students attend secondary school only after passing this national exam.

The political economy of education reforms reveals that each political turn of the country is marked by a decisive education reform. In 1971 the first reform to expand education, named after its designers Grossetête-Dossou-Yovo, was met with sharp resistance by school-level actors who denounced the neo-colonial intent behind the initiative and its discriminative orientations. When the military seized power in 1972, they endorsed the resisters' charges against this reform and initiated an egalitarian reform, following Marxist-Leninism (cf. Okoudjou et al. 2007). With relative success, the egalitarian reform known as *École Nouvelle* envisioned schools as production units and aimed to put an end to the prevailing elitist education system. In the late 1980s, university students, teacher unions and activists of the clandestine Communist Party of Dahomey (PCD) defied the military regime through mass demonstrations, insurrectional tactics and strikes (cf. Chris 1992, p. 46).

Both domestic and foreign pressure pushed the regime to convene a national conference in February 1990 to discuss solutions to the socio-economic crisis. But the gathering turned to be a political forum that eventually resulted in a multi-party democracy and liberal economy for the country. The conference concluded with a one-year transition to constitutional change and presidential elections. With a national consensus about pursuing liberal democracy and market economy, the fate of the *École Nouvelle* reform was sealed. After blunt critiques of the poor outcomes of the reform, delegates agreed to reform the education sector completely and to restore the country to its former pride as *Quartier Latin de l'Afrique*<sup>2</sup> by convening a national workshop on education as early as possible. With the country shifting from military Marxist dictatorship to liberal democracy, education reforms were believed to bring about significant socio-economic and political changes. The curricular reform under study is one of the structural changes initiated during the 1990s.

### Disproportionate Foreign Influence

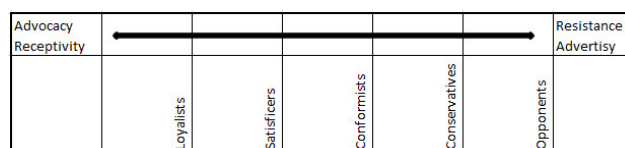
The processes that led to the curricular reform challenged the assumption that policy measures require the active involvement of grassroots actors in issue salience, agenda setting and subsequent policy proceedings. Effective school reforms originate from local pressure by grassroots actors such as teachers, students and parents (cf. McGinn 1998). The lack of popular demand for curriculum change, the instrumental role of financial and technical partners and the new context of liberal democracy support the claim of the disproportionate foreign influence, compared to endogenous pressure in this policy process. This section is inspired by the detailed work by Welmond (2002a), as it provides a synthesis of the reform process by highlighting the specific influence of foreign actors.

While the National Conference contributed to solving the prevailing socio-political crisis, it also offered the opportunity to critically examine the crisis in the education sector. As early as October 1990, but after the EFA summit, a national workshop on education, *Etats Généraux de l'Éducation*, was convened to

assess the education sector and devise appropriate reforms. Even though most participants were government officials, the global think-tank in education, UNESCO, influenced key decisions by producing a series of diagnostic studies that served as basic documents of the workshop (UNESCO project BEN/89/001 1990a, 1990b, 1991). The idea of a comprehensive reform of the education sector originated from these diagnostic studies for instance. In the same vein, there is adoption of the Education Policy Letter in 1994 which was strongly supported by the World Bank; the document served as a national reference in education policy until the 2003 education law. Moreover, USAID became instrumental in the process by assisting in the formulation of the 15 action plans that were strategic in improving the quality and access of basic education. Adoption of the 15 action plans by Benin officials was a requirement for receiving the first instalment of US\$50 million in the form of budgetary support. In order to coordinate the effort by a multiplicity of domestic and foreign actors, a Round Table on education took place in 1997.

Similarly, designing the curricular reform along the CBA required significant input from the part of donors, especially USAID; the institution initiated the Children Learning and Education Foundation (CLEF) project to reinforce the ministry of education's capacity in technical matters. The project contracted foreign experts to train Benin's educationists in curricular design and planning; it also provided need-tailored technical assistance related to all 15 action plans. When the CLEF project ended in 2003, it was relayed by the Equity and Quality in Primary Education (EQUIPE) project, another US-contracted project to pursue reform activities. The latter project continued assistance to curriculum design, teacher training and printing contracts.

The curricular reform action plan had six teams of curriculum designers; each was to define the sets of competences, abilities and skills for students at a specific grade level and in each field of study. The design teams succeeded in integrating the former 22 school subjects into six fields of study, namely French language, mathematics, science and technology, social studies, art and physical education. In addition to these core competence domains known as disciplinary competences, designers introduced two categories of competences: transversal and transdisciplinary competences.<sup>3</sup>



Tab. 1: Actors' spectrum. Source: own representation

Actors	Total	Loyalists	Satisficers	Conformists	Conservatives	Opponents
Inspectors	3	2	1			
Pedagogic Counsellors	11	2	6	3		
Principals	14	3	2	3	6	
Teachers	21	1	6	10	3	1
Parents	246	1	66		179	

Tab. 2: Numerical summary of actors along the spectrum. Source: own representation

After a satisfactory pilot stage in 180 schools, the countrywide scale-up began in 1999 with first graders. Incrementally, by 2005

all six grades in primary school adopted the new curricula with subsequent in-service training of teachers, production and distribution of textbooks and curricular guides. But soon after, the innovation became a bone of contention, instigating proponents and opponents among teachers, parents, pedagogic counsellors and inspectors.<sup>4</sup>

### The Actors' Spectrum

Empirical findings of this study support the idea that the global optimistic discourse about education influenced local actors' advocacy and receptivity of the CBA. On the other hand, contextual constraints, disappointing policy outcomes and the contagion effect of organized movements fuel resistance. Analytic induction of grassroots actors' narratives, contrasted with insights from direct observations enabled to identify two variants of advocacy as reflected in the attitudes of loyalists and satisficers, and three types of resistance, as illustrated in the attitudes of conformists, conservatives and opponents. After assessing the research participants' policy-relevant knowledge, their intellectual conviction of the CBA and the level of their personal commitment, the study devised a spectrum of actors ranging from loyalists at the strongest end of advocacy to opponents at the weakest end.

#### Loyalists and Satisficers for Advocacy

Advocacy refers to the supportive attitudes of loyalists and satisficers. Loyalists are actors who manifested higher commitment to the new curricula and displayed sound intellectual conviction in the CBA; whether teachers, supervisors or parents, they belonged to socio-economic and professional categories that exposed them to the development discourse behind the innovation. Loyalists have an advanced level of academic education or professional training and attended several in-service workshops on the curricular approach either as trainers or trainees. They are in positions of authority and close to the decision-making sphere. Normative and quite defensive, loyalists view the new curricula as 'an absolute necessity'. Loyalists espouse the development-oriented ideal of the innovation and feel compelled by duty to advance the cause of the reform in their constituencies. However, when faced with crude field constraints, this normative stance seems limited by loyalists' helplessness, as they content themselves with complaints about lack of means. Their apparently strong commitment contrasts with their inability to devise local strategies to solve real implementation problems. Loyalists argue along the same line of ideas as this parent in a focus group discussion on 4<sup>th</sup> April 2009: 'We are living in a global world where no single country can survive in isolation ... the new approach is universal; therefore it is a necessity for our country. We have to prepare our children to face the challenges of their time'.

Next to loyalists on the advocacy end of the spectrum are satisficers. '*Satisficing*' describes the behaviour of actors who seek to maintain satisfaction with new policy measures by conceding useful change (cf. Bache/Taylor 2003, p. 280; cf. Grindle/Thomas 1991, p. 28). Satisficers purposefully embrace change by taking advantage of the innovation to get some utility, the niche of confidence and satisfaction. Though sharing similar learned advocacy with loyalists by displaying sound policy-relevant knowledge, intellectual conviction and commitment, satis-

ficers go one step further, being more straightforward, objective and pragmatic. The rationality that guides their choices consists of getting the best out of the reform and leaving the redundant.

To be selective requires knowledge, skill and organization. Satisficers have an advanced educational background and proven professional experience. Eclectic in their procedure, they never consider former teaching approaches and materials as obsolete; rather, they skilfully combine strategies to get results. While critical to policy implementation, especially the teacher training component, satisficers devised several strategies to cope with problems. They admire the complexity of the CBA because it reinforces their professionalism. Satisficers like to use their acquaintance with the innovation to create for themselves an image of 'the expert' and reap substantial returns in terms of influence on colleagues and '*à côté*'.<sup>5</sup> Determinant factors of satisficing include a liberal vision of education and the availability of policy-related incentives. Similar factors apply for parents except that availability of alternative sources of education and the means to provide them to their children are most important. Most satisficers argue along a similar line of ideas as this vice-principal of a religious school interviewed on 11<sup>th</sup> November 2008: 'You are caught up in a powerful water current without knowing how to swim. Instead of struggling against the adverse water current, it's safer to let yourself go in the direction of the current so that you can find something to cling on'.

#### Conformists Conservatives and Opponents for Resistance

Resistance is a reactive strategy to counter overtly or covertly pressures from outside a social group (cf. Bache/Taylor 2003, p. 282). The first variant of resistance in this study is conformism; it consists of displaying formal compliance with prescribed measures while potentially behaving differently in private. It is a passive resistance strategy pertaining to power unbalance. Scott (1990, p. xi) called this strategy a 'situational logic' by which '[t]he poor sang one tune when they were in the preserve of the rich and another among themselves. The rich spoke one way to the poor and another among themselves' (in Bache/Taylor 2003, p. 284). Although situated in the middle grounds between advocacy and resistance on the spectrum, conformism is more closely related to covert resistance than to learned advocacy, as conformists' attitudes contribute less to policy improvement. The mask of conformism seems to be the safest to wear in this policy debate due to the power dimension involved in the matter. In fact the curricular reform is a high stakes innovation sponsored by the international community. Declaring opposition would equate to contesting power, the power of educationists and development experts. In such conditions conformists spare themselves the risk of being identified as contesting an innovation that top-level actors masterminded. Holding lower positions in the education hierarchy as teachers, conformists appear enthusiastic at first before delving into contradictions in the course of discussions, like this veteran 5<sup>th</sup> grade teacher during an interview on 4<sup>th</sup> November 2008: 'Since things are changing with time, we are growing and we need to update our needs in order to keep pace with those who progress... I can't tell more ... Honestly I support the NPE... Me, I am for both causes, teacher-centred and student-centred pedagogies'. They are brief, reserved, prudent or voluble, excessively accusing and complain-



ing about their work conditions. They share in common a blind advocacy of the CBA by displaying appalling lacks of policy-relevant knowledge and intellectual conviction.

Next to conformists are conservatives. Though both share in common the covert resistance strategy, differences between them emerge with a scrutiny of their respective arguments and attitudes against the curricular reform. Conservatives distance themselves from the policy discourse by using the indefinite 'they', 'we have been told', 'our trainers said', as illustrated this public school principal in an interview on 20<sup>th</sup> April 2009: 'I feel more comfortable teaching the previous curricula; I don't know why they brought us this NPE. Honestly, I can't understand what was wrong with the former curricula'. Another distinctive feature is that conservatives are near to retirement. They display enough policy-relevant knowledge to enable them to appraise the worth of the innovation. Similarly, their conviction and commitment never go beyond the fulfilment of their duty. Rather proud of former teaching practices, they tended to resist new ideas that challenged their pedagogical role as knowledge transmitters.

Conservatives profess the value of traditional pedagogical beliefs, such as behaviourism and its derivative practices such as teacher-centeredness, systematic teaching of linguistic tools in French, the virtues of dictation, physical chastisement, discipline, error-free language usage, legible handwriting and mental arithmetic. Pointing to the limitations of the CBA, conservatives argue that it is impossible to 'construct buildings without materials'. They consider children to be almost *tabula rasa* or at least lacking the basics to construct knowledge by themselves at basic level. Thus they think the approach to education should be teacher-centred at this level, as children need to acquire 'the materials' before being asked 'to construct' their own knowledge later.

Rather sceptical about the potential of this reform to solve the educational and socio-economic problems of the country, conservatives explicitly accuse the innovation of propagating indiscipline, laziness and incompetence among the youth. As a solution, they suggest a return to the previous curricula, which had proven their worth by producing valuable citizens and useful literates.

The strongest variant of resistance is opposition, an overt movement. It became institutionalized with the active role of unions and the efforts of the Communist Party of Benin (PCB) to counter implementation of the NPE reform. While the covert resistance strategy is an individual initiative of resisters, active resistance is a collective movement that is nationwide in scope, with mass demonstrations and teachers' union strikes demanding reform suspension. Both technical and ideological arguments legitimate opponents' resistance.

Technically, though acknowledging the scientific rationality of the CBA, oppositional forces denounced its implementation in Benin as well as elsewhere in francophone Africa. Instruction should be carried out in native languages, rather than in French. In a conference organized to celebrate the ninth anniversary of the International Day of Mother Tongues on 21<sup>st</sup> February 2008, INIREF, PCB's think-tank, dedicated a special communication to resistance against the NPE reform. It provides key reasons for opposing the innovation. Like most education systems inherited from French colonization, argued the

presenter, Benin school system is extraverted by depriving children of their 'soul', which is 'their mother tongues'. If the CBA valued socio-constructivism as its advocates pretend, the simple fact of continuing instruction in French falsifies its pedagogic merits, and insidiously perpetuates 'neo-colonialism, the domination of the French language over our national cultures, in short, the assassination of our Beninese spirit and soul' (Iko 2008, p. 29).

Opponents systematically attributed the current students' underperformance<sup>6</sup> to the curricular innovation, on the grounds that the approach undervalues children's socio-economic, cultural and linguistic heritage for allowing instruction to be continued in French. As a consequence, children get confused and can barely learn, or in the better cases they get extraverted, denying their own cultures and development potentials; thus the relevance of their underperformance. Opponents consider the policy a complete failure and suggest an alternative reform. In its 'project of popular emancipation', PCB proposed an endogenous education reform similar to the Tanzanian *Ujamaa*, 'Education for Self-Reliance'. So far, the actors spectrum summarizes the multifaceted interactions and attitudes of local actors in regards with the curricular innovation in five gradations ranging from loyalty to active opposition. While acknowledging that this heuristic device came out of the analytic induction of actors' narratives and should not be considered as conclusive, it nevertheless offers the opportunity to reflect on the competency-based curricular paradigm in practice.

## Discussions

This section reflects on the arguments on each side by considering local advocacy to reflect educational policy convergence and resistance to be the combination of three sets of factors.

### Educational Policy Convergence and Local Advocacy

Educational policy convergence relates to a global movement by which development agencies promote the adoption of similar education policies across the world, in the purpose of promoting a certain world education culture (cf. Jakobi 2009; cf. Resnick 2006). The movement involves actors, agency and various mechanisms of policy transfer and diffusion. Major actors include intergovernmental organizations, epistemic communities and individual states. While the epistemic community composed of universities, scholars and international consultancies in the fields of social and behavioural sciences grants scientific legitimacy to the proposed policy ideals, international development agencies such as the World Bank and UNESCO provide the political legitimacy by endorsing and promoting these ideals.

The relevance of educational policy convergence in the current case of local actors' advocacy has root in the crystallizing effect of the CBA. In theory the approach is credited with the potential to render the youth competitive, autonomous, democratic and growth-generating. In terms of scientific legitimacy, the approach enjoyed the contribution of scholars from Belgian think-tank in education and training (BIEF), from the observatory of education reforms (ORE) in Québec and the International Bureau of Education in Geneva (IBE), who actively worked to give the concept 'competence' a robust episte-

mological grounding in general education (cf. Acedo/Georgescu 2010; cf. Rogiers 2010; cf. Jonnaert et al. 2007; cf. Jonnaert et al. 2004).

In Benin, adoption of the approach was not only a function of the obvious need for school reform, but most importantly, of the disproportionate foreign influence. From the *Etats Généraux de l'Education* in 1990 to the Round Table on education in 1997, not to mention the innumerable forums, workshops, training sessions and international evaluative consultancies (DevTech, BIEF, Creative Associates Inc., *Groupe Louis-Berger*), the influence of global institutions such as UNESCO, UNDP, World Bank and USAID gave both scientific and political legitimacies to the CBA. This explains the deep conviction and commitment of loyalists and satisficers, who demonstrated learned advocacy of the curricular reform. If educational policy convergence accounts for the attitudes of actors on the advocacy end of the spectrum, what about actors on the resistance end?

### Three Gradations of Policy Resistance

Analytic induction of actors' responses reveals that the combination of contextual constraints, disappointing policy outcomes and the contagion effect of organized movements justified resistance.

#### Contextual Constraints

The curricular reform was seriously challenged by the discrepancies between the poor qualifications of teachers and the level of sophistication of the innovation. Upon the generalization of the reform in 1999, half of the teaching staff in public schools lacked professional qualifications (cf. MENs 2006, p. 34). In addition, semantic opacity of new terminologies contrasted with the limited academic level of new recruits. Curriculum designers broke with past curricular practices by introducing pedantic terminologies in most documents. In mathematics, for instance, the term *equation* is used instead of the familiar *operation*, and *proportionality* in place of the common *fraction*; the use of *learner* instead of the common *pupil*; the Anglicism *item* is used instead of the familiar *rubric*. The semantic opacity was so relevant that a lexicon was edited to help teachers comprehend new terminologies. Moreover, the large number of documents edited in the policy process (curriculum guides, teachers' guides, textbooks, workbooks, and training packages) suggests that the reform was not meant for ordinary school actors. Lannoye (2005, p. 52) counted as many as 80 documents produced in the framework of the curricular reform at the primary education level. At each grade level, a teacher has to read the curriculum and teachers' guides for all six fields of study, in addition to textbooks and workbooks in French language and mathematics. A minimum of 16 documents is necessary for a teacher at each grade level. While the conceptual sophistication of the CBA required more documentations, it made the innovation a 'hostage of inspectors and other specialists' who had better control of it than did front-line actors such as teachers, students, principals and parents (cf. Bernard et al. 2007, p. 569).

Finally, material constraints undermined the reform. Lack of infrastructure, school libraries, science laboratories, materials and equipment was a common complaint among teachers in public schools and less affluent private schools. Large class

size challenged the disposition of having students work in groups of four or five. While the official teacher-student ratio of 1:50 could allow somehow such a disposition, 1:84 and 1:167 were extreme teacher-student ratios in a few schools visited.

Their severity of these constraints foreshadowed the disappointing policy outcomes.

#### Disappointing Outcomes

I am illiterate; one day, I asked my sixth grade son to read the names on the signposts in the field. He repeated the same name for all four signposts we found. From my expectation that the names should be different – and I knew the names were different –, I realized that my sixth grade son was unable to read. It's a pity! (a parent in a rural school, focus-group discussion on 24<sup>th</sup> March 2009).

As illustrated above, students' literacy deficiencies come first as the most recurrent complaint. Reading deficiency has roots in grade inflation as well as in the shift to a holistic strategy for teaching the reading skill. Implementation of the CBA engendered grade inflation, as the subsequent assessment scheme allows more students to pass without much effort in core subjects like French language and Mathematics. Previously, these core subjects used to be given maximum weight; now that they are graded on equal footing with any other subject, less student effort is required to pass the grade average.

Besides, the holistic approach to teaching reading and writing worsened the deleterious situation. Based on the linguistic principle that signs have meanings in context, the holistic approach minimizes mechanical letter identification. Instead of teaching the 26 letters of the French alphabet by differentiating between vowels and consonants and by combining letters to obtain syllables in isolation as usual, teachers are now required to teach letter identification by highlighting individual letters within words and by placing the words in a meaningful sentence. The introduction of this holistic strategy at the onset of the school system in first grade disadvantaged many children who were not familiar with the French language before attending school.

By imposing a number of burdens on parents, the new curricula raise a problem of equity in education. Indeed, only relatively well-off and quality-minded parents can afford to provide enabling conditions that maximize learning outcomes for students. In addition to hiring a qualified home tutor, buying textbooks and workbooks on a yearly basis, and supplying school materials and photocopies, parents enrolling their children in private and religious schools must pay a tuition fee that varies significantly across schools. Parents with modest means and those living in disadvantaged areas have no choice but to use the available free public school. In addition, the innovation contributed to a denial of education to many children, depriving them of the perceived opportunity of upwards social mobility associated with schooling. In fact, students who repeated a grade prior to the systematic introduction of the new approach in that grade level were the first victims of the policy, since they had limited options to continue education. The majority of students who repeated the second, third, fourth, fifth and sixth grades, respectively, in 2000, 2001, 2002, 2003 and 2004 were reported to have dropped out because they lacked previous grade preparation in the new approach. In fact, the policy failed to anticipate this problem. No remedial plan to accommodate students who had repeated a grade level prior to the systematic introduction of the

new approach was found in the policy documents consulted in this study.

Moreover, many literate parents suffered overnight obsolescence because the NPE rendered them unable to monitor their children at home as they used to do. The new terminologies and higher level contents in the new documents made it hard for them to oversee their children's education.

### The Contagion Effect

Contextual constraints and disappointing outcomes favoured propagation of negative attitudes towards the curricular reform. The unfavourable atmosphere was exacerbated by a dysfunction of the communication and public participation action plan. In fact, there was no initiative to involve parents in the policy process, simply because of the deliberate 'closed-door policy' of curriculum designers who 'were resentful of any improvement suggestions by practitioners'. Likewise, decision-makers at the ministry of education chose to remain silent in the on-going debate. During a 2004 workshop, for instance, it was decided 'to avoid all immediate contradictory debate' in relation to the various critiques formulated against the policy (cf. MEPS 2004, p. 55, in Carlos 2005, p. 25). Thus substituting for officials, trade unions, PCB and other opinion leaders took advantage of the silence to propagate their charges against the innovation. Unfortunately, most of the charges coincided with the realities of many grassroots actors, producing a contagion effect. Opponents' social movements consisting of mass demonstrations, teachers' union strikes and public conferences subsequently undermined the reform.

Parents' attitudes in Abomey-Calavi school district one illustrated how the national anti-reform propaganda weakened their receptivity to the new approach. In a few reference schools (private and religious schools) that had relatively high quality educational services, infrastructure and better student performance, parents nevertheless complained about the reform. They simply relayed the negative views about the reform, lamenting reading and writing problems, the imperialist intent of the policy and the rent-seeking behaviour of officials. This negative attitude contrasted with the pride and confidence that they felt about their children's schools. Though these same parents admitted awareness of the difference between their children's performance and that of students at other schools, they nevertheless conveyed the national complaints.

### Conclusion

This paper is an insight into the debate of whether a world education culture exists as a homogenized set of policy measures across education systems (cf. Anderson-Levitt 2003). After examining the attitudes of frontline actors such as teachers, parents, students and supervisors towards the implementation of the CBA to reform school curriculum in Benin, the study found that global push to homogenize school systems results in heterogeneous practices of actors from the periphery. While the global advocacy around the CBA illustrates the thesis of world education culture, the five gradations on the spectrum give credence to the thesis of diversity in practice. A major finding of the study is the policy paradox that more non-practitioners (supervisors) tend to be located on the advocacy end of the spectrum whereas fewer classroom actors (teachers) are identified with satisficing. Given that

the latter attitude is a productive one and likely to make the reform prosper, one can conclude that even though the CBA was technically fit in policy discourse, its effective implementation in the classroom is taking longer than anticipated. Although this paradox is symptomatic of the prevalence of previous teaching practices, satisficing teachers' adaptation of change provides the prospect of beneficial transformation.

### Notes

- 1 Acronym for Nouveaux Programmes d'Etudes, official name for the reform
- 2 Dahomey, former name of Benin, was nicknamed Quartier Latin de l'Afrique for the quality of its elites who were prized in most French West Africa (AOF).
- 3 Transversal competences refer to the set of competences that learners acquire across fields of study (e.g. critical thinking). Transdisciplinary competences relate to the ability of learners to transfer school knowledge and skills into real life.
- 4 Inspectors are appointed chief school district officers. Administratively, they represent the Minister of Pre-primary and Primary Education in their constituencies. Pedagogic counsellors assist inspectors.
- 5 Welmond (2002b, p. 53) used the term to refer to benefits other than salary that civil servants receive both officially as part of their employment and unofficially as a result of their station (e.g. per diems, allowances and bribes).
- 6 The new pattern of student underperformance amounts to functional illiteracy despite years of basic education. While students get promoted, many are lacking in basic credentials such as literacy and numeracy. The yield of the reform in learning outcomes for students is insignificant (OIF et al. 2005).

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