



## Obstacles Related To the Educational Monitoring of Teacher Collaborators by School Principals in Benin

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### Abstract

This research explores the obstacles related to the educational monitoring of teacher collaborators by school principals in Benin with the aim of analyzing social dynamics within primary schools. To achieve this objective, we adopted a qualitative approach including a semi-structured interview guide and a focus group interview. The results showed that the excessive tasks assigned to principals, as outlined in the responsibilities of the principals, the low academic and pedagogical standards of some, and the imposition of assigned classes hamper pedagogical monitoring. This creates tensions and conflicts, leading them to resort to circumvention strategies to save face. These behaviors have significant implications for teachers' continuing education and training, with a view to ensuring the quality of educational provision. In conclusion, this research addresses a fundamental aspect of primary school life.

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### Introduction

In Dahomey, in 1896, a secular primary school was established in Porto-Novo and was quickly closed due to poor management. The "school for the sons of chiefs" was run by a white man who taught the first grade (Gracia, 1971). This school system formed the primary school system in Dahomey. In the villages, schools were run by soldiers and interpreters who never achieved good results.

Beginning in 1960, Dahomey, which became independent, underwent several reforms in the primary education subsector. The headmaster was responsible for a class, often the second year of the Cours Moyenne

(CM2). The 2003 law on the orientation of National Education in the Republic of Benin, amended by the 2005 law, emphasizes the Certificate of Primary Studies (CEP) examination as the final exam for primary education. So the work in the classroom and more particularly in CM2 is decisive if not worrying. In this line of ideas, the Minister of Nursery and Primary Education (MEMP) proceeded to the discharge of 610 in 2016 and 82 principals in 2017 respectively by decrees 219/MEMP/DC/SGM/DAF/SP of September 19, 2016 and 105/MEMP/DC/SGM/DAF/SA/102SGG17 of September 8, 2017. The discharged principals are therefore those who obtained a zero success rate, or 0% in their respective schools, during the Primary School Certificate (CEP) examination in 2016 as in 2017.

(Alladakan, 2022). At the end of each school year, rankings are also made according to this examination. The top five (05) at the municipal, departmental, and national levels are targeted and rewarded.

The standards also specify that while the school principal holds a CM2 (grade 5) qualification, the CI (grade 1) qualification is awarded to the highest-ranking and most experienced teacher. These two entry and exit classes for the lower primary cycle are a priority. This clarification aims to ensure the quality of teaching in these two classes.

Numerous other regulations, such as Order No. 140/MEMP/DC/SE-CSDS/DRH/SP of June 21, 2012, on which the Minister relied, prioritize the monitoring of teaching staff. Legislation and other policy documents emphasize that the pedagogical monitoring of staff is part of the school principal's specifications. In 2006, the primary education and educational inspection departments revised these specifications for the stakeholders in the educational animation network with the support of the USAID-funded ABE-LINK BENIN project. The school principal is part of it, and his or her responsibilities are recorded there. These standardized texts are reproduced in the form of ministerial decrees. We can cite decree No. 075/MEMP/DC/SGM/DAF/SA/SA/086SGG18 of August 3, 2018, where the school principal is responsible for the life of the school. In 2024, the Francophone Initiative for Distance Training of Teachers with the (MEMP) designed booklets for principals of nursery and primary schools. The first booklet is entitled, "ensuring the pedagogical management of the school", the second "ensuring effective management of the school at the administrative and material levels" and finally the third, "developing quality relationships to promote the school". These booklets, without contradicting the official texts, explain and comment on what is expected of a school principal. School principals are also aware that this support, which is the educational monitoring of assistant teachers, is part of their responsibilities. But for fear of being relieved of their duties and of appearing surreal in the eyes of the hierarchy, they try to find good excuses highlighting the relief. The supervision of CM2 students then becomes the priority. Several reasons also give water to their mill: the various requests, assistant teachers who are not cooperative and who deliberately refuse to be monitored. The management of accounting, relations with the outside world, secretarial work should be reserved for specialists (accountants, supervisors, executive secretaries) as is the case in secondary schools

in the opinion of the principals. These "dirty jobs" in secondary schools, according to Payet's (1997) expression, are less important activities within the school. Collaborating teachers take advantage of this occupation to strengthen their autonomy of action within the classroom (Roaux, 2020). This opacity, Alladakan (2014) densifies the content of the unspoken aspects of the teaching profession. Added to all this are other forms of internal conflicts in schools. Although it is included in their specifications and they are aware of it, what motivates school principals to neglect the pedagogical monitoring of their collaborators?

## **Materials and Methods**

This research was conducted in the Abomey School District (CS) in the Republic of Benin. It is divided into four pedagogical zones within which there are eight (08) Pedagogical Units (PU). The sample was drawn randomly, taking into account the principle of the geography of pedagogical zones. This enabled a panel of public and private primary schools from all social categories (urban, semi-urban, and rural areas) in the Abomey region. These criteria made it possible to interview school principals and two of their colleagues about the pedagogical monitoring of all primary school teacher targets by school principals. These teachers are State Civil Servants (FE), State Public Law Contractual Agents (ACDPE), private school teachers, and Teaching Aspirants (AME). Two focus groups—unplanned at the outset—were organized in the field, including one with school principals and one with their staff. Two interviews were conducted with two of the four primary school teachers, and approximately thirty in-depth interviews were conducted. A total of 10 school principals, 18 teachers, and two educational advisors were involved in this research. Not all of the data collected was used in the writing of this article.

## **Results and Discussion**

### **The Regulatory Framework for Primary School Management in Benin**

According to policy documents and legislative texts in the Republic of Benin, the school principal is the representative of the Minister responsible for preschool and primary education. As such, they are responsible for the administrative, pedagogical, and material management of the school. They are the authorizing officer for the school's budget. Administratively, he or she develops, in collaboration with the Educational

Advisor (EA), the annual and quarterly schedules and the monthly programming of all activities and makes them available. The various regulatory notebooks and registers must be maintained by the EA or by other collaborators designated by the EA. The school's statistical sheet must be completed with the EA's care. The principal also monitors and controls the punctuality and regularity of staff attendance, maintains the school's archives, and allocates roles and tasks within the framework of collective management in accordance with Circular Letter 1895/MEN/DGM/DEPD of 7/11/75. He or she must ensure the availability of trash receptacles in each classroom and in the courtyard, flowerbeds, urinals, and latrines, as well as their maintenance. The school must have an orchard or field and a shaded courtyard. Playgrounds must be available and landscaped. He or she must support the school cafeteria by establishing a garden and/or a school field.

He or she must monitor the achievements of students in the Introductory and Preparatory Courses, as well as those taught by novice teachers, every two weeks, and organize pedagogical experience analysis sessions for his or her assistant teachers. The analysis reports must be included in the school logbook. The principal convenes the teaching team, ensures the implementation and/or deepening of the learning acquired during the Teaching Unit sessions, organizes the certification assessments and practice exams based on the year's activities, and sends a progress report and the students' results to the Head of the School District through the hierarchy.

The school-community relationship must be effective through meetings with the Parents' Association office and other regulatory General Assemblies. The minutes of these meetings must be made available, as must the parents' visit logbook. The school must open up to society by organizing an open day each year. All of these responsibilities fall under the responsibility of the principal. For good collegial management, each teacher must be comfortable in their teaching practice through the class they would have liked to teach.

### **Imposing Class Sizes on Teachers**

The distribution of teachers among classes in the Republic of Benin is based in part on two fundamentals: entry into the primary cycle, that is, the first grade (CI) and the second grade (CM2). These are managed either by the school principal or their direct assistant. The reasons are known and shared by the hierarchy and the entire teaching staff. Children entering school for the

first time need protection and security, given their biological age. They must be welcomed and integrated into the educational institution, which operates according to its own rules. Therefore, it is advisable to entrust this class, which is the gateway, to an experienced teacher with the appropriate and necessary skills. The results of the Certificate of Primary Studies exam represent the culmination of everything that is at stake, of everything that is done within the school. The CM2 class is the final "place" where this exam is prepared. This is the school's showcase. If there are enough failures here, the school will have a bad reputation, so it's often the principal who maintains it.

Aside from these two classes, principals, to ensure the good intellectual level of the new students to be welcomed in CM2, "place" the teachers of their "liking" in the first year of the Middle Course (CM1). In doing so, others ignore the criteria governing this allocation:

"I don't take that into account. This one is necessary, he's the one who has to, she was the one who has to, otherwise..." (Principal, EPP Dozoémè)

"When it comes to assigning teachers, it's what I decide and do." (Principal, EPP Ahouaga/B)

"The principal knows that next year, this particular employee must teach this particular class for the work to work." EPP Director Zounzonmè/B

These comments perfectly demonstrate how school principals excel in imposing class assignments on their teaching staff. The CI may not be kept by the person with priority. This isn't their problem, according to the teachers we spoke to. The goal is to provide the necessary cramming in CM so that as many students as possible succeed.

### **Academic and Professional Levels Questioned**

A candidate for school principalship in Benin must hold a Certificate of Teaching Aptitude (CAP) and have some seniority in the teaching profession. They must be included on the list of candidates for the position with a good grade. This follows an inspection of potential principals organized by school district heads. The juries are composed of zonal educational advisors, regional education authorities (RUPs), and former principals. The lists are then posted and sent to the departmental directorates of preschool and primary education, where proposals are made and sent to the Ministry for

appointment. This is the rule. Therefore, a teacher who has completed these various steps in the appointment process is expected to be up to the task entrusted to them.

Yet, in several public primary schools in Abomey, the journals containing lined up and filed pedagogical preparation sheets are properly endorsed and sealed. However, pedagogical advice notebooks are nonexistent. If they exist, there is often no trace of the principal's advice. They are often empty. This is confirmed by these observations from one of the pedagogical advisors:

"The pedagogical advice notebooks are empty. The school principal doesn't even know what pedagogical advice to give to his colleagues" (CP Zone 1, Abomey)

Among teachers considered exemplary, clean class journal notebooks are carefully filled with index card references consistent with the monthly distribution. But none of the index cards, neatly filed in daily folders, were consistent with the training areas and lesson sequences planned for the month. And yet, these principals had signed these notebooks and approved the administration of the content thus organized by their colleague in the pedagogical monitoring notebooks.

This scenario was perfectly illustrated by the words of a principal who mistook us for, or considered us to be, the inspector:

"Sir, I'm sorry. I can't imagine that a teacher like that could trick me like that. He tricked and humiliated me.... It must be said that we received no training as part of the supervision of our staff." (Principal, EPP Agnangnan)

There are some principals who don't master the conceptual content of other courses they aren't responsible for. And they have a poor appreciation for their staff's preparation. Instead of questioning themselves if the latter maintain and defend their positions, which turn out to be correct, they impose themselves. The discussions on this subject are heated and sometimes go beyond the school grounds. Here is a teacher's statement on this subject:

"The principal often doesn't master the knowledge to be taught." (Teacher, EPP Djimè/B)

"The invention of writing" was a point of contention between my principal and me. I had to go and get the book containing the concept to show it to him before he was convinced." (EPP Teacher Gnansata)

### **Pedagogical Monitoring of Teachers by School Principals: Between Norms and Reality**

Through the normative framework outlined above, we note a slew of tasks to be assumed by the school principal, which fall within a world of texts and representations (Ph. Perrenoud, 1993). They are prescriptive and represent an ideal to be achieved. These responsibilities, as described here, translate into a set of instructions made to the actors, the school principals. Their aim is to get them to act quickly. They are formal in the sense of organizational sociology. But in the daily work of school principals in Benin, what actually happens in practice? As members of the Pedagogical Animation Network (RAP), they are often called upon by their local management to participate in sessions to familiarize themselves with the Pedagogical Unit (PU) modules. They are also responsible for a class, often the CM2 (grade 5) class, and are required to deliver results at the end of the year. They are also called upon for administrative tasks. The school principal is thus caught between a hierarchy that asks them for various assignments and their class, which they must prepare and run. They are between a rock and a hard place, as this educational advisor explains:

"Just yesterday, we were taking ownership, but when we told them about all the sessions that have to be held with you and everything, we still noticed a certain reaction. We are really pushed to the limit and we call the principal..." (CP, Zone 4, Abomey).

"Sometimes you are asked for a session, sometimes you have to respond to letters" (Principal, Zoukpa EPP)

These cries of frustration from school principals are an expression of the excessive pressure exerted by the administration and the overload of their leadership work. With the various demands from management, including the running of the Teaching Units, these stakeholders are already feeling resentful. Added to this are the other requirements listed above and the pedagogical monitoring that is at stake.

Even if these principals possessed all the skills required to meet all these requirements, they would still have to succeed, given a schedule that doesn't allow teachers a moment of respite in the classroom, and also the time taken up by the various demands. This type of principal can only be found in the world of texts. The limit isn't the skill required, but the workload and the impossibility of also managing pedagogical monitoring. The real-time

management of their own class and the lesson preparation that this entails, the various demands, exceed the intellectual and physical resources of a human being. They exceed them even more since these processes are different and do not require the same regulations. What these transcripts seem to sum up well:

"It's not easy, you know! We try to find ourselves in it, it's really difficult." (Director Ahouaga/A)

"So, he needs to be a little free, he needs to have the time he needs to devote to his colleague." (Director EPP Hougoudo/B)

The first thing that's lacking is time. They themselves don't have the time." (Teacher, EPP Guézoyèmè/C)

Through these three statements, we understand the bitterness and heartfelt cry of the school principals. In doing so, they adjust to the norm by doing what they can afford and trampling on other prescriptions that are out of the ordinary. Furthermore, the CPs have in their specifications the monitoring of principals. To do this, they follow the teacher in their classroom with their principal. At the end of the classroom practice, it is the principal who leads the interview during the pedagogical experience. The CP only intervenes as needed and provides advice afterward. This is a way for the CPs to monitor the pedagogical performance of their colleagues. This approach solves two problems: monitoring the principal and their colleague. But what's going on? The educational advisor's activity planning is not strictly regulated. Visit times in schools are also recorded on paper. He decides today to monitor the principal at a given school. But upon arrival, he notices the principal is absent, perhaps called away on another mission or at a meeting somewhere. Sometimes, he is present but does not make himself available for educational monitoring.

"Mr. CP, fine! All week, I haven't been able to work with my CM2 children." (CP Abomey, zone 4)

"Please. You can visit my colleagues, but I myself would really like to work in my classroom." (CP Abomey, zone 4)

By using classroom work, the principal seeks to maximize his position, and therefore his power, by considering the children's interests to be above the work of the teacher and therefore the educational monitoring. In reality, each party defines its priority based on its own scope of intervention and responsibility (Roaux, 2021).

### **Class Assignment: Two Competing Interests**

As a result, they encroach on the individual interests of their colleagues. Some teachers have a preference for certain courses. For example, the Preparatory Course (CP) or the Second Year Elementary Course (CE2). For the former, they believe that the children have already completed the initiation. And the following year will be one of deepening. For the latter, they argue that the students have already learned to memorize the "lessons." The teacher no longer has to push himself too hard. This difficult task, which is never recognized by the supervisory and inspection body, delays the teacher in advancing the curriculum. There are also some who have taught certain courses several times and have mastered them, and want to be assigned them. Here, there are two benefits: They have no difficulty with the knowledge content, and the preparation sheets are already prepared.

And it is with good reason that Leroy-Audouin and Suchaut (2007) speak of this "specialization," which effectively corresponds to teachers' preferences for a given class (...), and therefore also reflects a certain comfort level in practicing the profession. The teacher is thus valued; they become specialists in a given course, even if the texts do not allow it. This characterizes them and gives them an identity. The diversity and relevance of these ways of doing things, of the "know-how," of the habits built up over the course of experience (Ph. Perrenoud, 2001) will earn the admiration of other colleagues. This position is defended by this teacher.

"There is poor management of staff, that's it," (Teacher, EPP Adankpodji/A)

"Sometimes, they take into the class the teacher who hasn't completed the training. I'm an example of that." (Teacher, EPP Adandokpodji/A)

These comments demonstrate how class assignments are imposed on teachers, which is often not to their liking.

"I didn't follow the training. I complained to the CS authorities, but my CP told me to take the class." (Teacher, EPP Doguèmè/A)

This highlights a conflict between the principal and the staff member, which was expressed through a complaint to the Educational Advisor.

How can a teacher give their best at work if, already during the year, they are assigned a class they don't want? How can they give their all to work in this



conflictual atmosphere at school? The classroom, as "the basic unit" (Tardif and Lessard, 2004, p. 81), always boils down to a teacher facing students, hidden from outside view. Who will be held accountable if he only gives exercises to the children without ever explaining them, or if he copies lessons on the blackboard without any commentary? Perhaps his professional conscience. How many of them have such a role? We are in an opaque profession with its own characteristics. (Alladakan, 2014).

As a result, this conflictual situation, which arose following the allocation of classes to school teachers, created a certain distance between the principal and his colleagues. Total mistrust reigns within the school. The principal is no longer accepted in the classrooms by the assistant principals.

### **What skills do school principals need?**

Receiving a promotion, changing social status, or welcoming a new position outside their current one has always been a wish of every public or private sector worker. We feel valued by those around us. The same is true for family members and loved ones, given the privileges, benefits, and advantages associated with the new position. Experiencing upward mobility is good, but having the ability to assume roles is ideal. Today's workplace operates more than ever before according to a rational approach, with clearly defined objectives, imperatives, constraints, and requirements. Results-based management, with work plans, is discussed in all public and private organizations.

Responsibilities are all the greater when one is at the head of these organizations. As a social actor, workers have interests to defend, tastes, and desires. And, it draws its power from the zone of uncertainty, Crozier (1977) to get out of trouble. The school as an organization is hardly exempt from this rule. Let us assume that the criteria for appointing these directors are respected and they have all the assets to exercise the profession. The fact remains that they are overwhelmed with responsibilities as described above. Who can refuse a chief of staff, a secretary general of a ministry or a technical director to quickly affix his signature to a letter that he has not read if the urgency is indicated and the minister is only waiting for that to complete a file that is expected at the council of ministers? Or who would reproach a head of department for having affixed his signature to a letter prepared by a former collaborator and requested by the higher hierarchy? Public opinion is

made by people who, themselves, exercise professions and know from the inside, that one cannot always be rational, rigorous, efficient, objective. (Ph. Perrenoud, 1999). And one principal rightly asserts this:

"It must be said that we received no training in the supervision of our staff." (Principal, EPP Adandokpodji A)

A classic way of saying, "Let it survive" within the school organization.

Moreover, the consistency evident in the absence of any trace of pedagogical advice in the notebooks of some staff members is clearly expressed. These principals have questionable levels of academic and pedagogical knowledge. If the school principal lacks the necessary background or the necessary pedagogical tools and experience, how can they advise their staff member?

The source must be higher than the fountain, they say. This is what one pedagogical advisor seems to be saying:

"But there is a minority, let's admit it, if you don't mind, do they really have the necessary level of pedagogical knowledge? It's true, they were proposed, they were appointed, all right. But we don't feel it in their performance. This leads one to believe that he only has highly competent teachers. However, this is false. All we have to do is visit the classroom and start by searching to assess the damage. By doing so, they are complicating our task." (CP, Zone 1 Abomey)

Whose fault is it? The administration that proposed them and the minister who appointed them? Clearly, this answer can be put forward. The shortage of qualified and experienced teachers in the Republic of Benin is becoming increasingly rare given the recruitment freeze that has characterized the sector. Added to this is the number of aspiring teachers.

Therefore, we can only make decisions based on the number of eligible teachers on the list of candidates for principal positions. If these fall short of the number of vacancies, logically, we can no longer be too strict about the criteria governing appointments, at the risk of leaving schools without authority, without leadership. The appointments of the school principals mentioned are partly justified.

Given that they lack the necessary supervisory skills and do not know what pedagogical advice to give, are these schools principals not justified in targeting and

authorizing the conduct of teaching without the slightest comment, at the risk of saying unnatural things?

In conclusion, the responsibilities of a school principal in the Republic are numerous. Aside from the classroom they teach, they are simultaneously administrative, financial, and supervisory. They are responsible for collective management. Faced with this excessive overflow of tasks, they find it impossible to fulfill them all. They resort to selecting tasks, prioritizing some, and subordinate others, including the pedagogical supervision of their colleagues. Many other reasons explain why principals abandon this activity in favor, they say, of pedagogical work in their own classrooms.

The assignment of classes to collaborating teachers is not done consensually in some schools visited during our survey. Principals impose classes on assistant teachers, and even on those who have not received training. It should be noted here that Benin is currently reviewing the curricula for the Introductory Course and the Preparatory Course, where the school teachers who are required to teach these classes are trained annually.

This situation has led to crises where teachers no longer accept their immediate superiors in their classrooms. Some, lacking the appropriate academic and/or pedagogical skills, hide behind the crisis to save face. They aim for the prep books without reading them and implicitly refuse to offer advice. They resort to many other strategies to justify the choices they make and positions they take.

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