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**A playground for education reform or a battlefield of donor
intervention?**

Local debates on primary education and
the New Study Programmes in Benin

(revised version)



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Abstract

This article gives insight into aspects of educational policy making in Benin from 1990 until 2008 following an anthropological policy research approach based on empirical data. It presents local debates on primary education and the New Study Programmes, the latest educational reform introduced nationwide in 1999. The different perceptions of the reform content, its implementation process and its outcomes, articulated by education experts, policy makers, donors, intellectual critics, teachers and parents, illustrate the complexity of educational policy making and, implicitly, of state building in transnationalised arenas.

Dieser Artikel gibt einen Einblick in verschiedene Aspekte der Beniner Bildungspolitik zwischen 1990 und 2008, basierend auf empirischer, ethnologischer Policy-Forschung. Im Zentrum meiner Untersuchung stehen lokale Debatten über Grundschulbildung und die letzte, 1999 landesweit eingeführte Bildungsreform „Nouveaux Programmes d'Etudes“. Die verschiedenen, von Bildungsexperten, politischen Entscheidungsträgern, Geberinstitutionen, intellektuellen Kritikern, Lehrern und Eltern artikulierten Sichtweisen auf den Inhalt dieser Bildungsreform, ihren Implementierungsprozess und die Ergebnisse, illustrieren die Komplexität bildungspolitischer Aushandlungsprozesse, sowie implizit, die Komplexität von „state building“ in transnationalisierten Arenen.

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A playground for education reform or a battlefield of donor intervention?



Local debates on primary education and the New Study Programmes in Benin

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In this article I present local debates on primary education and the New Study Programmes in Benin. The New Study Programmes (NSP), the latest education reform introduced nationwide in 1999, is a widely and controversially discussed topic in Benin.¹ The different perceptions of its content, its implementation process and its outcomes, articulated by education experts, policy makers, donors, intellectual critics, teachers and parents, illustrate the complexity of educational policy making and, implicitly, of state building in transnationalised arenas in general. National policy making is according to Ball (1998: 126):

[...] inevitably a process of bricolage: a matter of borrowing and copying bits and pieces of ideas from elsewhere, drawing upon and amending locally tried and tested approaches, cannibalising theories, research, trends and fashions and not infrequently flailing around for anything at all that looks as though it might work. Most policies are ramshackle, compromise, hit and miss affairs, that are reworked, tinkered with, nuanced and inflected through complex process of influence, text production, dissemination and, ultimately, re-creation in contexts of practice.

The story told in this article, is the story of how I experienced this process of bricolage relating to educational policy making, as it was seen and done by different actors in my field of research. Whenever I discussed education in Benin as part of my PhD project on international nongovernmental organisation's interventions in the formal primary education sector, I was inevitably led to discussing the NSP. The discontent with the reform programme expressed by several teachers' trade unions and quite a lot of parents, teachers and school principals resounded throughout the land. The *Confédération Syndicale des Travailleurs du Bénin* (CSTB), a platform for trade unions, stated in a call for strike on the 11th January 2007 as one of their claims:

la suspension immédiate des Nouveaux Programmes d'Etudes [et] une politique éducationnelle qui se fonde sur un programme d'instruction patriotique autre que celui des Nouveaux Programmes inspirés par les puissances d'argent et dont les résultats catastrophiques sont perceptibles par tous.

What had led the trade unions to formulate such a statement? Was this opinion shared by others, too? Why were the results of the NSP perceived to be catastrophic and the reform said to be inspired by nothing but foreign capital? What were the NSP all about?

According to a policy implementation research carried out by Welmond (2002) the NSP were characterised by three main traits: First of all, the reform was initiated in 1990 at the time of the "democratic renewal"² that marked the transition from 17 years of Marxist-Leninist rule to a multiparty democracy. Secondly, the NSP were considered as a *systemic* education reform, foreseeing not only tremendous changes in pedagogy (a shift from the transmissive rote system to learner-centred, constructionist approaches and a new arrangement of subjects), but also adjustments in educational planning, personnel management and accountancy. These adjustments were part of an agreement between the Beninese government and the main financier of the reform: the United States Agency for International Development (USAID). This "unique case of policy dialogue between one donor and one government" featured according to Welmond (2002: 87) as its third main trait.³

¹ Representatives of the Ministry of Education tend to skip the "new" in the denotation of the study programmes, saying that the reform cannot be new after nine years of generalisation (cf. Zinsou-Ply 2007). In this text I stick to the original title of the reform as it is this title which dominates public discourse.

² According to Bierschenk (2006) this is the term used locally for the peaceful regime change of 1989/ 1990.

³ In addition to Welmond's country case study on Benin which provided interesting background material for this article, Moulton et al. (2002) present four other country case studies (on Guinea, Ethiopia, Uganda and Malawi) dealing with system-wide education reforms in sub-Saharan Africa that were introduced in the 1990s.

If the provision of educational services is seen as a hallmark of “modern” statehood, then education reform implementation and its surrounding debates offer a window onto mundane processes of state formation;⁴ looking at the ways in which the state is seen and done.⁵ In the case of the NSP the processes of seeing and doing the state take place in a highly inter- and transnationalised arena. An arena in the sense that Bierschenk and Olivier de Sardan (1997: 240) define it drawing on Bailey (1969) and Swartz (1969), “is a place of concrete confrontation between social actors interacting on common issues”. Transnationalisation means according to Zürn and Leibfried (2005: 14) “a combination of privatization and internationalization” which, among other factors, increasingly affect the welfare dimension of states, leading to its reorganisation. In the case of my study, transnationalisation implies the presence of transnational actors such as international nongovernmental organisations and the spread of transnationally shared ideas and objectives such as the Millennium Development Goal “Education for All”.⁶

My aim is not a historical analysis of education reform programmes as Tonah (2006) did for the case of Ghana; nor do I want to come up with another evaluation of the NSP.⁷ I want to provide an insight into aspects of educational policy making in Benin from 1990 until 2008 following an anthropological policy research approach that “attempts to uncover the constellations of actors, activities, and influences that shape policy decisions and their implementation, effects, and how they play out” (Wedel et al. 2005: 39; cf. Shore and Wright 1997). Similar to Tidjani Alou’s (1996) analysis based on material from Niger, I show how state actors and “development partners” with often diverging interests but the common goal of development-oriented state-building interact on various fronts in a national arena. I pose the question whether the primary education sector in Benin can be seen as a playground for educational reform or a battlefield of donor intervention. With this I add a piece to the puzzle of the empirical study of state formation processes in West Africa as outlined by the research programme “States at Work. Public Services and Civil Servants in West Africa: Education and Justice in Benin, Ghana, Mali and Niger”⁸.

Field observations, press reviews and interviews were conducted in March 2006, November 2006 to April 2007 and January to February 2008. The contact to interview partners engaged in the conceptualisation and financing of the reform were established using a nonprobability method of sample selection commonly referred to as “snowball sampling” (Kromrey 1998:

⁴ Analysing state formation processes from an anthropological perspective enables us according to Sharma and Gupta (2006: 9) “to examine the dispersed institutional and social networks through which rule is consolidated, and the roles that “non-state” institutions, communities, and individuals play in mundane processes of governance”. This perspective must however be grounded in empirical, ethnographic research (cf. Bierschenk in print).

⁵ For the useful empirical differentiation between “seeing the state”, i.e. examining the “image of the state”, and “doing the state”, i.e. looking at “state practices, see Migdal and Schlichte (2005: 14f.).

⁶ “Transnationally shared” does not mean that these ideas and objectives are internalized equally by everyone on the planet. Often they are developed and expressed as joint commitments by multilateral agencies such as UNESCO, UNICEF and the World Bank and very little “owned” by countries in the South (cf. King 2007).

⁷ For evaluations of the NSP see Lannoye 2005; Midling et al. 2005; République du Bénin 2006; Tesar et al. 2003 among others.

⁸ For more information on the research project, please visit: http://www.ifeas.uni-mainz.de/projekte/StatesatWork_neu.html. My PhD project is conceptualised as complementing other individual research projects within the “States at Work” framework concentrating on community schools in Mali (Koné), basic education in rural Ghana (Tonah), primary school teachers in Benin (Bierschenk; Tama), primary school teachers in Niger (Ali Bako) teacher’s trade unions and state construction in Benin (Chabi Imorou), and as providing a base for comparison regarding research projects focussing on the intervention of international nongovernmental organisations in the education sectors in Ghana (Abubakari) and Niger (Peressin). This article also benefited from insights gained by Brandecker (2007) in her M.A. research on the dynamics of educational reform processes in Benin.

273)⁹ while “following the thing” (Marcus 1995), i.e. the reform idea to its source. Most of the interviews were held in the neighbouring cities of Cotonou and Porto Novo in the South of Benin, being the site of the Ministry of Education and most of the development agencies’ headquarters. Interviews with inspectors, educational advisors, school principals, teachers, parents and local NGO staff were mainly conducted in the two rural municipalities of Nikki and Karimama in the North. Both municipalities have very low enrolment rates and are thus considered as *zones rouges*, i.e. problematic school districts by the Ministry of Education. I chose Nikki as a field site because of its high amount of education projects carried out by international nongovernmental organisations, this being the main subject of my PhD research. Karimama was chosen as a site of comparison because of its quasi absence of education projects. In Parakou, the regional capital of the Borgou/ Alibori province in which Nikki and Karimama are situated, additional data was gathered during a regional forum on education. The interview extracts reproduced in this article are presented in their original language, i.e. either in French or in English.

In what follows I will first give an historical overview of the events that led to the conceptualisation of the NSP. Then I will turn to the reform content and aim and bring in some points of critique as they were articulated by my interview partners. After that I give a short introduction to the background and position of the debate’s protagonists before I tackle financial, political and geo-strategic/ ideological issues under discussion. Finally I move beyond the NSP to take a look at the currently dominant education politics carried out under the auspices of the World Bank-led “Fast Track Initiative” for primary Education for All.

The New Study Programmes: history

Following the *Conférence Nationale des Forces Vives de la Nation Béninoise*, proclaiming the democratic renewal and the end of the Marxist-Leninist regime in February 1990, a National Conference on Education (*Etats Généraux de l’Education*) was launched in October 1990. This brought together more than 355 people involved in educational matters (representatives of the government, of teacher unions, students, pupils, consultants, ambassadors of donor countries, and representatives of donor agencies¹⁰), who assembled to face the serious problems in the Beninese education sector, which had just reached their peak in the “*année blanche*” of 1989. Teachers’ salaries had not been paid and massive strikes led to the annulment of the whole school year (Guignido Gaye, Laourou, and Zounon 2001: 86). The net enrolment rate was as low as 45% and Welmond (2002: 88) goes so far to claim that “[t]here was a national consensus that the Beninese people should be ashamed of the state of their education system”.

Commonly, this problematic situation is linked to the perceived “failure” of the *Ecole Nouvelle*, the socialist education system in place since 1975. Wetzig (2007) however, questions this “failure” in her research report. After interviewing more than 30 people that were directly involved in the development and implementation as well as the practical experience of the reform, she concludes that in retrospective the reform was much more valued than in the texts that were announcing its failure and the necessity for a new educational framework (see for instance République du Bénin 1990: 49ff.). This revaluation is certainly linked to the current devaluation of the NSP, but also to a differentiation between a

⁹ The „snowball sampling“ relies on references from informants about other informants who share the same characteristics. It is a sampling technique used for the identification of group members, whose affiliations are at first sight unapparent for the researcher (Kromrey 1998: 273).

¹⁰ See list of participants in République du Bénin, 1990: 165ff.

mostly positively viewed socially adapted reform content and its technical problems of implementation.

The technical problems prompted the government in September 1989 to ask for an objective, outside analysis of the Beninese education system and for assistance for its improvement. This “upstream analysis” (Sack 1995: 2) entitled *Assistance à l’élaboration d’une politique éducative et d’un programme d’investissement pour le secteur de l’éducation au Bénin* was financed and coordinated by the United Nations Development Programme (UNDP) and the United Nations Educational, Scientific and Cultural Organisation (UNESCO). The more than 200 reports written between 1989 and 1991 as parts of this analysis were very influential in the Beninese reform process, providing first of all substantial input for the National Conference on Education in October 1990 (Welmond 2002: 91).

The aim of this conference was to restore society’s trust in the public education system by formulating, on a democratic, consensual basis, recommendations for a systemic reform in line with the national needs of the new democracy, the international action plan „Education for All“ initiated in March 1990 in Jomtien, Thailand and the advices expressed by the World Bank, stressing the importance of education for economic development (République du Bénin 1990: 9f.; cf. World Bank 1988).

Inspired by the UNESCO-UNDP reports which recommended an increase in nonsalary inputs, the establishment of an in-service teacher support network, the reorganisation and redefinition of the responsibilities and chains of authority of the Ministry of Education’s administrative units, a reallocation of financial and human resources and the development of a programme budgeting system (Welmond 2002: 90), the National Conference on Education created the *Document Cadre de Politique Educative* which was adopted by the government in January 1991. In addition to the technical advices from the UNESCO-UNDP consultants, recommendations based upon personal experience and political manoeuvre brought forward by conference participants entered the document such as measures to revalorize the teaching profession¹¹ and minimum standards for the quality of education. The aura of historical change also left its traces in stressing the importance of a new education system including a new curriculum for the new Beninese citizen (Welmond 2002: 91f.).

The implementation process of the New Study Programmes could thus be read as a process of administrative and social engineering: “Administrative” engineering, as policy makers tried to put a complex part of the state apparatus on new tracks; “social” engineering, as it was not only the state apparatus, but society that should follow these tracks. Different to a similar “modernisation” and “democratisation” of pedagogical concepts which was born out of a societal movement in the United States and Europe in the 1970s, the Beninese reform prescribed societal change through a technical intervention “from above”; an “above” that included not only national policy makers but to a much wider extent than during previous education reforms financing and know-how from multilateral financial institutions and international “partners”¹² (cf. Bierschenk 2007). According to Tabulawa (2003: 7) it was a “natural choice” for those donor agencies and international “partners” to support a learner-

¹¹ Welmond (2002: 116, note 2) notes the double meaning of the term “revalorization” in francophone West Africa: “it refers to the belief that teachers are not paid in a manner commensurate with their ‘value’, as well as the need to convince everyone that teachers are indeed of high value”. The need for the revalorization of the teaching profession was never erased from the list of claims articulated by teacher trade unions since the National Conference on Education in 1990. In fact during the National Forum on Education in 2007 it figured as a point of debate in its own right.

¹² For a critical reflection on the “partnership” rhetoric in development co-operation in education see Lange 2003; King 1999 and the special issue n° 41 of NORRAG NEWS 2008.

centred education reform with its inherent “democratic tendencies”, given their democracy promoting foreign policy mandate pushed to the fore after the fall of the Berlin wall in 1989. A common feature of this democracy promotion project was the integration of an education sector reform into wider structural adjustment programmes, an “educational adjustment” so to say (King 1991: 207; Chisholm and Leyendecker 2008: 199).

The *Document Cadre de Politique Educative* satisfied the conditions for the World Bank’s second structural adjustment credit and opened the door for further donor investment. According to Brandecker’s interview with the country representative of the private for-profit international consulting firm Creative Associates who had been involved in two large education projects in Benin: “They called all the *bailleurs* [i.e. donors] together and said: This is what we want to do! Who wants to help?” (Brandecker 2007: 20).

The biggest financial and technical support for the reform came from the bilateral United States Agency for International Development (USAID) who had not been active in Benin before. In September 1991 they sent a team of experts, who developed in less than a month their guidelines for a non-project assistance of US\$ 57.5 million, based on the UNESCO-UNDP reports and the *Document Cadre de Politique Educative*. A non-project assistance is “a policy instrument that gives a government financial incentives to adopt policies and meet sectoral objectives” (Welmond 2002: 93). As an instrument quite similar to the World Bank’s structural and sectoral adjustment programmes, using conditionality to release lump sums of financial support, it gained prominence in USAID’s funding approaches in the 1990s (Moulton and Mundy 2002: 2).

In Benin this budget support that was indeed regarded as a “democracy bonus” by many, was intended to trigger off a systemic transformation of the primary education system that did not only aim at education for all, but *quality* education for all, focussing on a new curriculum and “Fundamental Quality Schools” (FQS or *EQF – École de Qualité Fondamentale*). These quality standards that went much further than the recommendations of the UNESCO-UNDP and the *Document Cadre de Politique Educative* (Welmond 2002: 94) included under the heading “inputs” aspects such as teacher qualification, school environment, equipment (in infrastructure and learning material), administrative capacities and the socioeconomic environment of pupils. Under the heading “process” norms that tackled the attitudes of administration and teaching staff, teaching methods, and the weekly workloads of pupils and teachers were defined. Later on measures for the internal and external efficiency of the programme were added (Ahanhanzo et al. 2005: 29).

New Study Programmes: content and aim

In order to operationalise the reform ideas and to get the first five million US\$ tranche of the USAID assistance, the Ministry of Education¹³ installed so-called *pilotes de la reforme* as heads of departments, who were responsible for the conceptualisation of 15 action plans divided into three categories: pedagogy, planning and institution building. These reform pilots were generally highly qualified education experts at the top ladder of their educational career, i.e. school inspectors or university professors. One of the pilots responsible for the reform of the curriculum explained to me the procedure:

¹³ To keep it simple I will use the term “Ministry of Education” in this text, meaning the Ministry responsible for Primary Education (among other sub-sectors). The Ministry changed its denomination five times since 1990 due to political changes and reforms in the education sector. It is now called Ministry of Preschool and Primary Education.

Alors, donc au départ j'ai monté une équipe à l'INFRE (*Institut National, pour la Formation et la Recherche en Education, S.F.*). Donc avec cette équipe, nous avons élaboré des modules de formation. Ces modules de formation nous ont permis de former les concepteurs de programmes d'étude. C'était en Août 1992. [...] Il y avait des instituteurs, des inspecteurs, des directeurs d'écoles, des conseillers pédagogiques... [...] Donc l'équipe était très grande. Et c'est après ça, donc après cette formation, on a arrêté les... ce que les gens ont appelé les grandes disciplines, les champs de formation. [...] Fin 93 début 94 nous avons déterminé les champs de formation... Et on avait à l'école primaire 22 matières. [...] Les 22 matières on les a intégrées et on est arrivé à six champs de formations. [...]: Il y a Education Scientifique et Technologique, il y a l'Education Sociale, on a Education Artistique, on a Education Physique et Sportive, et on a Mathématiques et Français. [...] Donc j'avais mis sur pieds six équipes qui correspondent aux six champs de formation. (16th February 2007, Cotonou)

The task of his team was thus to integrate the 22 subjects formerly taught in Beninese primary schools into six broad fields of instruction. During the experimental phase from 1994 to 1999, the new curricula and training materials were tested in 30 experimental schools across the country. The first year saw the introduction of the new educational programme in the first two years of primary schooling. Every following year the programme was introduced to a higher class and eventually spread to a larger group of 180 schools (*impliquées*) for further testing and revision.

In 1998 a new pedagogical concept was introduced into the reform framework, stimulated by ideas from Canadian and US-American (free-lancing) consultants who were sent to Benin as part of USAID's technical assistance programme. The "competence approach" which replaced earlier approaches focussing on content and learning objectives became the centrepiece of a number of educational reform programmes in sub-Saharan African countries in the 1990s (cf. Chisholm and Leyendecker 2008).¹⁴ The "competence approach", based on insights from socio-constructivist and cognitive pedagogical theories, places the pupil's competency (intellectual, methodological as well as social) at the centre of the learning process, not the teacher's objectives. It is also referred to as the "learner centred approach". The pupil or learner is not perceived as being merely a passive consumer of what is being taught by the teacher, but becomes actively involved in a process of learning by doing, discovering and adapting new knowledge guided by the teacher as facilitator.¹⁵ A methodical stress is placed on pupils' group work. The former reform pilot cited above remembered:

Alors la pédagogie qu'on avait [...] était la pédagogie traditionnelle où c'est le maître qui sait tout... [...] c'est la pédagogie frontale [...] Cette manière de faire ne permet pas de préparer des citoyens autonomes, des citoyens qui soient capables de prendre des initiatives, des citoyens qui soient responsabilisés. [...] Donc nous avons dit, ça c'est un problème qu'il faut changer, en tout cas il faut opter pour un autre type de pédagogie. (16th February 2007, Cotonou)

"Learner-centred education" was thus perceived as a means for producing a different type of citizen and a different type of society. These aspects of social engineering intended by the reform were stressed extensively by its architects and consultants. The former USAID

¹⁴ In Niger for example, the competence approach was an integral part of the *Nouveaux Programmes d'Etudes* developed in 2000 (Interview with the *Sécrétaire Général Adjoint* of the Ministry for Primary Education in Niger, 16th May 2007). Krämer (2006) describes the implementation of a similar programme called *Pédagogie Convergente*, with an additional focus on teaching and learning in local languages in the context of a project carried out by the German technical development cooperation (GTZ) in Dogonland, Mali. Chisholm and Leyendecker (2008) give examples from Namibia and South Africa; Tabulawa (2003) focuses on Botswana.

¹⁵ Babagbeto 2001: 12f.; BEP 2005: 32f. and interview with Babagbeto 6th March 2006, Cotonou; République du Bénin 1999: 12.

coordinator of the Primary Education Reform Programme compared the transformation to be attained by the NSP to that produced by the *Ecole Nouvelle*:

La finalité de la réforme, dans le cadre de l’Ecole Nouvelle, est définie en termes d’«exigences fondamentales». A l’analyse, et telle que formulée ci-dessus, il s’agit surtout de libérer de l’état d’asservissement dans lequel il se trouve, l’esprit du citoyen à former. Dès lors, il apparaît que le « **type d’homme nouveau**» est perçu beaucoup plus sous l’angle de sa libération du joug colonial. (Babagbeto 2001, emphasis in original)

The NSP, on the other hand, aims to

former des citoyens gestionnaires d’eux-mêmes, gestionnaires des problèmes liés à la vie socio-économique c’est-à-dire gestionnaires de leur environnement. Dès lors, il apparaît que le «**type d’homme nouveau**», celui du troisième millénaire, est perçu beaucoup plus sous l’angle de sa capacité à s’adapter au monde en général (ibid.).

In 1999, the reform programme was replicated and generalized throughout the entire nation’s 4,500 or so primary schools, covering one class level per year. While the pedagogical approach introduced in the first two grades (CI and CP) remained still the old objectives approach, the third grade experienced the first trial of the competence approach in 2001. The generalization phase was officially finished in 2005, but according to information of the international nongovernmental organisation IFESH (International Foundation for Education and Self-Help) further generalization and adaptation was still under way in 2006, as not all schools could have been reached by the programme and not all of the schools reached by the programme were successful in implementing it.¹⁶ Apparently, the teaching and learning material which adapted the competence approach for the CI and CP was introduced in the school year 2008/09.¹⁷

The debate: matters of content and context

While I was doing research on education projects carried out by international nongovernmental organisations in the north-eastern municipality of Nikki, I could not ignore the frustrations expressed by several parents on the learning effects of the NSP. A parent from Sakabansi told me:

Les NPE sont en train de trahir les enfants. Les enfants ne retiennent plus beaucoup des choses. Ils ne peuvent pas s’exprimer. Ça a un impact négatif. (Member of the *Association des Parents d’Elèves* (APE) of Sakabansi, 12th March 2007)

The same was said by a father from Nikki centre, the landlord of the *paillote des retraités* (the retired men’s meeting place), in which I was discussing the NSP with several old men. He said that the children do not learn anything with the NSP, that they are not even able to write their name when they finish primary school. One of the old men pointed out that the landlord should be happy that his children could go to school. In contrast to the old system, the NSP was not for the elite only and even people from the village were now able to get some knowledge. This was seen critically by another old man who said that this was exactly the reason why the learning level of the NSP was so low: The rich ones, the “capitalists” would not want their children to be taught the NSP, they sent their children to private schools run by

¹⁶ Group interview with the IFESH headquarter team, 13th March 2006, Cotonou.

¹⁷ Interview with a former reform pilot and inspector at the head office for primary education at the Ministry, 9th January 2008, Porto Novo.

the French. Consequently the rich kids would get the good degrees and the poor ones remained dumb (Group discussion, 30th January 2007, Nikki centre).

I tried to understand why the NSP, which sounded plausible to me in its conception, had such a bad public image and asked a professor for history at the University Abomey-Calavi, who is well known for his critical view on the New Study Programmes, for an explanation.

He told me that his interest in the Programmes started some three or four years ago, while he was doing historical research in a village. There was no electricity and so he started playing with the children at night. He asked them to write some words in the sand or calculate with small numbers. He was very surprised to see, that they were neither able to write the simplest words, nor calculate with the simplest numbers! When he went back to Cotonou he told this experience to his friends, who said: “But this is not only the case on the country side, even here in Cotonou educational standards are low!” He decided to dig a bit deeper into the problematic and conducted research on the NSP in around 100 schools, talking to more than 300 people. According to his point of view, the pedagogical problems of the NSP are related to its global method which replaced the syllable method (learning first the alphabet, then syllables, then words). For countries like the US the global method does not pose any problems he said, because children are learning in their mother tongue. They are not learning the alphabet, but start instantly to pronounce the sounds they hear. But, according to him, things that are good for the Americans are not automatically good for the Beninese. The problem in Benin is that most of the children do not speak French before they come to school and with the global method they do not learn the alphabet correctly. A lot of children are not able to write their name, even in the final class. The initiators of the NSP noticed this after a while and reinserted the syllable method and the dictate as so-called “corrective measures” in the programme, he explained.

Another problem the historian sees is the grading system. According to the “old” system, results could be either right or wrong. Now four facts have to be considered: 1. is the objective fulfilled? (*objective*), 2. is the page clean? (*tache*), 3. is the word/ number/ picture in the centre of the page ? (*centrage*), 4. are the colours used harmonic? (*harmonie*).

Examples: If a child is asked to paint a picture of an aeroplane and it paints a bird instead, this would be wrong according to the old system. With the NSP the teacher has to try to think like the child: The child did not completely miss the objective, because a bird is also a flying object, like the aeroplane. Thus he gives the child two out of five for the objective. If there are no stains on the page, if the bird is nicely placed at the centre and painted in pretty colours, the child could get a lot of points without actually presenting the result that was in demand. If it paints the Beninese flag with one colour at the wrong place, it gets nevertheless two out of three points. In total, he concludes, this system pushes up the average grades of success, reduces class repetition rates and makes the donors happy, but not the parents.¹⁸

Je juge un programme en fonction des produits qui en sont issus. Et je constate que ces produits là posent de problème. On dit à un enfant de CM2 [sixth grade, S.F.] comment t’appelles tu? Il dit je t’appelle Jacques; je t’appelle au lieu de je m’appelle [...] bon, il y a des choses comme ça [...]. Je ne suis pas contre vous s’il y a de nouvelles choses à introduire, je suis tout à fait d’accord. Est-ce que les Nouveaux Programmes sont adaptés à nos réalités

¹⁸ The most blatant example of the manipulation of success rates in Benin was according to Colot (2006: 39) the final exam in primary schools in 2004/05, one year after the generalisation of the NSP. Despite the dissatisfaction that parents felt vis-à vis the new programmes, despite the frequent teacher strikes that left little time for teaching, the success rate was 100%!

d'ici, à mon avis non! Est-ce que c'est parce que le niveau des enseignants est faible, non; parce que ce qu'on leur dit d'appliquer, ils appliquent cela et ça a donné les résultats que ça doit donner...je t'ai raconté l'anecdote d'un Monsieur qui est allé chez son ami non? Et l'ami était assis au salon en attendant que le Monsieur sorte. Il y avait l'enfant de son ami là très petit qui lisait couramment, il récitait, il remuait la tête comme ça. Et quand son ami est sorti il dit, mais mon cher ton petit là il a de l'avenir hein! Il est petit comme ça et il lit si couramment? Ah donc les Nouveaux Programmes c'est très bon! Il était 20h et il y a délestage et l'enfant continuait à lire dans l'obscurité sans avoir les yeux dedans... (14th February 2007, Cotonou)

Parents are critical towards the NSP because they do not see any results, according to the professor. Children cannot read. They learn phrases by heart, pretending to be able to read in order not to get punished. The former “output-oriented” or “objective-centred” approach provided clear indicators what children were expected to learn in school. Now parents do not celebrate any more their children's exams because they consider them as *examens cadeaux*, not based on their children's competencies but on the practices of the NSP. Teachers would write the solutions during the exams on the blackboard: “*La fraude est devenue officielle!*” (14th February 2007, Cotonou).¹⁹ Besides, the professor added, parents have a lot more costs for all the photocopies, for buying textbooks on the black market and for paying better qualified tutors. And why do their children need tutors? Because neither teachers nor parents understand the manuals! Teachers had told the professor that the NSP were too complicated and too absurd, especially for those without training. And then they were supposed to be the pupils' partner according to the programme instead of being their boss! How was that going to work? (6th January 2007, Cotonou)

I asked myself if it was really the reform programme in itself that caused the frustration or if it was not its implementation process in a situation marked by a tremendous shortage of qualified teachers, printed manuals and concrete classrooms. Was it not due to the deep-rooted rote system that pupils learned by heart instead of trying to read? Was it not because of the frequent teacher strikes that parents paid tutors, which were often even less qualified than their children's school teachers? There were some inconsistencies in the professor's critique: At some points it was the NSP in its totality that figured as the bone of contention. Then again he considered the NSP to be a “corpus of phraseology, [...] good in theory but not in practice”; a programme that made you think: the nation is saved, but which in practice, was not realisable (6th January 2007, Cotonou). Why was it not realisable? Was it because the Beninese context was not receptive to the profound changes in pedagogy?

I asked one of the architects of the reform programme if it was not difficult for the NSP implementers to challenge a highly authoritative relationship between adults and children in demanding the teacher to be the pupil's partner. He said:

Mais nous sommes dans un monde qui évolue, qui change. Nous voudrions que des citoyens soient capables de prendre des initiatives ; [...] que des citoyens soient autonomes [...]. Bon alors dans ces conditions là [...], du point de vu culturel c'est l'autoritarisme absolu, est-ce qu'il faut dire qu'il faut continuer de perpétuer ça ? On ne pourra pas édifier une société qui réponde aux exigences de son époque. Donc il y avait ce problème là et nous avons dit qu'il vaut mieux changer...et ça fait partie des difficultés que les Nouveaux Programmes ont. Puis que les maîtres pour eux le rôle c'était absolu. En disant qu'il faut que son pouvoir fasse de l'élève son partenaire et que il y ait échange, mais c'est pour...pour le maître qui était

¹⁹ Tabulawa (2003: 18) writes that similar critiques claiming that the learner-centred “soft progressive” approaches were responsible for low and declining educational standards led to a denigration of these approaches in Europe and the United States, in the same countries that kept exporting “learner-centredness” to the “South” as a means for individual and societal democratic development.

autoritaire c'est un problème, mais nous on ne peut pas continuer de laisser le maître être autoritaire, ça ne nous permet pas de garantir l'avenir. (16th February 2007, Cotonou)

According to him an anti-authoritarian teaching approach was difficult to attain by the teachers who were used to their unimpeachable authority, but it was necessary in order to meet the objectives of the NSP: the education of self-reliant citizens.

The former inspector and regional coordinator of the in-service teacher-training programmes PETTP (*Primary Education Teachers Training Programme*) and PAAPEP (*Projet d'Appui Pédagogique pour l'Efficacité en Enseignement Primaire*) carried out by the international nongovernmental organisation IFESH since 1997 was also fully aware of the problematic shift in pedagogy:

Les NPE c'est un peu compliqué parce que ça demande la remise en cause des habitudes que nous avons contractées par notre pratique pédagogique anciennement. [...] Vous avez vu, au CM1 [fifth grade, S.F.] que la directrice elle-même dit «allez, travaillez en groupe». On ne vient pas en groupe sans avoir réfléchi au préalable soi-même sur la question. On vient en groupe on apporte quelque chose au sein du groupe. Ce n'est pas arrivé au niveau du groupe qu'on va commencer à chercher ce qu'on va apporter, ce qu'on va mettre en commun. Donc il faut remettre en cause les habitudes pédagogiques que nous avons contractées anciennement. Aujourd'hui on parle du socioconstructivisme. Bon! Vous voyez, c'est des concepts relativement nouveaux puisque on ne va plus dans une école de formation pour passer un an, deux ans. Il faut quand même que les gens s'y habituent, ça pose problème parce que la formation initiale n'était pas assurée, c'est tout. C'est la complexité des Nouveaux Programmes ça. C'est par rapport au personnel chargé de l'exécuter. (6th March 2007, Parakou)

He said that it is not the pedagogy itself which causes the problems related to the NSP, but the insufficient training of the implementers at the very base of the system: the teachers. Most of these teachers have never been to a teacher training college. They were employed by their communities or worked for the state on a contractual basis. In 1995 87.6% of the teaching profession had been considered “qualified” according to a study of the CONFEMEN-PASEC. In 2002 this percentage had declined to 51.5%, a decline that the authors of the study relate mainly to the cost saving measure of employing fewer public servants and more state contract and community teachers in Benin (CONFEMEN 2007: 22). The Structural Adjustment Programmes which had increased the pressure for personnel cutbacks in the public services, indirectly led to the closure of the teacher training colleges. They were closed until 2005/06 when representatives of the donor community which had advised the employment freeze for civil servants in the 1980s/90s pushed for their reopening.

A teacher training assistant and thus “change agent” employed by IFESH's in-service teacher training programme PAAPEP further exemplified the problematic:

En fait les Nouveaux Programmes, moi je les trouve très intéressants, [...] parce que ça favorise beaucoup plus l'épanouissement de l'enfant que les Programmes Intermédiaires [which spearheaded the NSP from 1990 to 1999, S.F.]. Moi-même, j'ai fait les Programmes Intermédiaires, mais depuis que j'ai commencé à exercer les Nouveaux Programmes d'étude, sincèrement je préfère ça parce que par rapport aux autres programmes tu retiens au moment où tu es en train d'apprendre et ça finit là. Or les Nouveaux Programmes d'études, même si ça fait des années plus tard, comme ça vient de toi-même ça reste beaucoup plus. Bon! Les Nouveaux Programmes ont besoin, pour qu'on observe une réussite il faut des enseignants compétents. Ça c'est très indispensable. En réalité c'est des programmes compliqués que n'importe qui ne peut pas se lever et venir enseigner. [...] [L]e contenu n'est pas mauvais; mais on peut l'améliorer pour faciliter l'exploitation aux enseignants. Oui, parce que tel que

c'est, il faut être un enseignant d'un certain niveau pour pouvoir comprendre correctement ce que le document dit. Or ici depuis un certain temps on ne recrute plus des enseignants compétents, ce sont des enseignants communautaires qui ont fini au CE2 [fourth grade, S.F.], vous voyez que même le français comme ça est déjà compliqué pour eux. Et ils iront lire ces documents, comprendre et venir enseigner, ça va être très difficile. (6th March 2007, Parakou)

The problem according to the IFESH representatives is therefore not only related to insufficient teacher training and a difficult change of pedagogical attitudes but also to a deficit in intellectual capacities. The head of the Basic Education Team at USAID confirmed this point of view:

I think that what was not properly assessed in the beginning was the capacity of the teachers to take it on. Okay. When you got now 50% of the teachers as community teachers and 25% are contractual and a little 25% are real teachers, sort of, at least they were trained at some point, you are looking at 75% of teachers that were never properly trained. Now 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. Well, they just haven't really understood what it means. They think it's a lot of work and blablabla, it's not. And then I've also heard that they don't think that the manuals for the teachers were well written. But I think that the main problem is not the program itself, it's, they don't have an appropriate audience to work, right? I mean you've got this great program and then you've got these teachers that are not really competent, [...] 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? I don't know how many times people get shocked coming into our funny, cosy, African-Canadian household and, you know, we talk around the table! Okay, well, in most families children don't talk. They're not allowed to talk! We completely ruined one kid that was staying with us for three years (*she laughs*). You know, because children need to learn to think. They need to learn to express their opinions and feelings and, not loosing respect, of course, but they need to learn to think. (8th March 2006, Cotonou)

This need to learn to think was not very much emphasized by the teachers I observed during class visits in Nikki and Parakou. Struggling with class sizes of more than 90 pupils, teachers often clung to their manuals and stuck to frontal lessons instead of doing the group work foreseen by the NSP. There was no room for experimentation and intellectual stimulation but rather only one answer to one question formulated according to the one and only manual.²⁰

I asked the professor of history whether he thought that the bad performance of the New Study Programs had something to do with the teachers' incapacity, due to insufficient training, to correctly apply the programs. He exclaimed:

Non! Pas du tout! C'est une raison, une excuse qui est avancée par ceux qui supportent les NPE. Le niveau des enseignants a baissé, c'est juste, mais les NPE sont arrivés comme un élément aggravant ! Le niveau des élèves sera mieux sans NPE. (...) Un bon pilote ne peut rien faire avec un mauvais avion ! (24th January 2007, Cotonou)

But how is a bad pilot or a pilot without a license going to fly a machine, whether broken or not?

²⁰ This profound gap between theory and application of the NSP was also noted by a team of consultants who did an evaluation of the USAID assistance in 2005 (cf. Midling et al. 2005: 2, 27), and by several MA students from the University of Mainz who carried out research on various school related topics in Benin in 2007 (see for instance Hällmayer 2007; Riesenkauff 2007; Voss 2007).

Excursus: Protagonists – backgrounds and positions

Before I move on in following the debate, I will provide some background to the different voices cited:

On one side we have the professor of history who exclaims: “Les NPE? Je vais les combattre jusqu’à mort!” (6th January 2007). He is a popular (some say populist) figure. His arguments against the reform programme circulate in daily newspapers; his articles appear in the catholic paper “La Croix”²¹. He stands up against government officials and the NSP-supportive donor community; he supports the claims of radical, mostly communist trade unions such as the CSTB and SYNAPRIM (Syndicat National du Primaire et de la Maternelle), and agrees with malcontent parents, teachers and school principals like the one from Mamassy Gourma who told me: “Les NPE, ça ne forme pas, il vaut mieux l’enlever! On ne comprend rien, on n’a pas les choses en main. Avec ça là, il y a le désordre! Ça casse la tête!” (11th February 2008). Unlike the vice secretary general of the CSTB and secretary general of the SYNAPRIM who is a similar popular figure on the front against the NSP, the historian has never been directly involved in the reform implementation. Some say that this could be the reason why he is so strongly against it. He is neither a politician nor an education expert but rather a philosopher.

The vice secretary general of the CSTB, the platform of trade unions that called for a suspension of the NSP – we remember the call for strike quoted at the beginning of this text – was heavily criticised for having been engaged in the implementation process of the NSP while at the same time calling for its boycott. In a newspaper article Sallon (2007) posed the question:

En effet, comment comprendre que des responsables syndicaux qui pendant dix ans ont participé à la mise en œuvre des NPE dans notre pays, en prenant part à de nombreux séminaires et fora, et ont empoché des sommes colossales, se lèvent aujourd’hui sans crier gare pour demander la suppression pure et simple des NPE?

The vice secretary general answered to my colleague Chabi Imorou, who works on a thesis about teacher trade unionism:

Cette implication aux formations se faisait dans le cadre professionnel [en tant que directeur d’école]. Mais quand je quitte le cadre professionnel, et je reviens dans le cadre syndical, alors la situation est autre et on peut contester. (29th January 2007, Cotonou)

While he could be reproached for a lack of integrity, he gives a good example of professional role switching (Elwert 1995), of taking turns in maintaining and opposing state practices and through this, of maintaining and hurting the image of the state.

Agreements between the government and the opponents on how to continue with an ameliorated version of the NSP were always short-lived. The radical unionists claimed a return to the intermediary programmes before introducing a new “patriotic” programme based on the use of local languages instead of French.²² They did not want to “sell their children’s

²¹ See for instance Iroko (2004): Nouveaux Programmes d’Etudes ou nouveaux problèmes?

²² An idea that was already formulated in Governor-General Jules Brevié’s failed reform attempt, the *enseignement populaire*, in the early 1930s (Asiwaju 1975), later brought forward by the socialist policy makers of the *Ecole Nouvelle* and finally incorporated as article eight in the *loi d’orientation de l’éducation nationale* (République du Bénin 2003). Nevertheless the idea never materialised, due to the difficulties of choosing some main languages among the 54 languages spoken in Benin, the problem of placing the right teachers at the right places, and the costs associated with translating and printing new school manuals, among other factors. I do not want to engage into the discussion whether mother tongue education is preferable or not, as this is a highly

future to the West”²³.

Who is “the West”? If we look on the other side of the pro-contra NSP-arena, we see not only representatives of international donor organisations but also reform pilots, technicians and education experts who are members of an international community, sharing educational idea(l)s and concepts with which they deal in their daily affairs. Whether of Beninese, Canadian or US-American origin, these people are entrepreneurs of a transnational discourse on the rights and wrongs of educational reforms. They are not only moral entrepreneurs (Becker 1981) or norm entrepreneurs (Fichtner 2005; Finnemore and Sikkink 1998), they are “policy entrepreneurs [...] who ‘sell’ their solutions in the academic and political marketplace” (Ball, 1998: 124). They admit technical and structural shortcomings of the reform, but defend its underlying pedagogical concept. Beninese education experts such as the reform pilots cited above who are predominantly retired teachers, professors and inspectors, try to realise as much their vision of a new Beninese education system that could revive Benin’s ancient reputation as the “Latin quarter of Africa”, as do the communist unionists on the other side.

Among the non-retired education experts we have for instance the former head of the department for decentralisation and coordination at the Ministry of Education. He started as a schoolteacher, went to university, obtained a PhD in international and comparative education from the United States, worked as a consultant for different donor agencies, taught at the University of Abomey-Calavi, came to the Ministry, left the Ministry, continued university teaching and took up studies in theology. He said to me:

Sarah, the educational system is like a train, it is not like a car. We have different sorts of cars; we have cars that run formula one races and we have vans, family cars that run the other way, but the thing with the car is that you can switch it one way or the other whenever you want, but with a train there is no way you can do that. The train runs on tracks and if you want to go left or right, it is not the train that you turn, you need to turn the tracks right or left. What I mean by that is, before you engineer any kind of reform in terms of education, you need to work on the context and make the context receptive to the reform before you launch the reform. Otherwise the reform will be out of context and will only trigger resilience, hostility, and, um, actually misunderstandings will be the basis of all those things. [...] But I consider all this as a very good apprenticeship of democracy and policy making. And hopefully, when the debate becomes technically enough again, then maybe we will think technically before thinking politically (22nd January 2007, Cotonou).

The political dimension of the debates surrounding the introduction of the NSP was obvious. You just had to switch on the national television to follow another call for strike by another teacher trade union later to be condemned by a Minister of Education, defending the NSP and blaming the strikes not the programmes for the pupils’ low exam scores (44.69 % in 2006/07 after the “miraculous” 100% in 2005/06).

complex topic that would lead us too far away from the actual subject. During a National Forum on Education in February 2007 the government agreed to experiment with the introduction of ten national languages as modes of instruction. The Ministry changed its name and repartition to Ministry of Pre-school Education, Primary Education and Alphabetisation (a repartition that was rearranged again a few months later) and set up a committee responsible for the conceptualisation of the language programme. For some trade unionists this initiative went not fast and far enough. The SYNAPRIM worked in its institute INIREP on its own programme that saw the introduction of *all* national languages. When the government was not capable to introduce its national language programme at the beginning of the school year 2007/08 (i.e. eight months after the decision was taken), the teacher trade unions called for strike (cf. Sallon 2007).

²³ Information obtained from Chabi Imorou whose ongoing PhD project in the context of the “States at Work” programme deals with teacher trade unionism and the construction of the state in Benin.

The same game on the ground: Two Educational Advisers²⁴ in Karimama told me about the difficulties they face in their job: “Dans le domaine de l'éducation rien ne marche ici! Ça n'intéresse pas les autorités; l'effectif est bas.” A nursery teacher listened and said that the problems are also there because of the NSP. One of the Educational Advisors answered furiously: “Non, non, laissez tomber ma soeur! Il n'y a pas un meilleur programme... c'est l'homme le programme! [...] Il n'y a pas un programme parfait. Le programme doit toujours être adapté. En plus, ça dépend du maître!” To me he said that the unionists would always blame the NSP but in fact it was them who ruined the system. “Les maîtres ne sont pas motivés ici. Ils ne s'intéressent pas! Et 90% des syndicats sont des paresseux!” (8th February 2008, Karimama centre)

So what was the struggle about? Power, status, money, ideology, “the West against the rest”, or content? Or was it just a matter of “passing the buck”?

When I mentioned the name of the critical professor of history in an interview with the national representative of USAID's “satellite-NGO”²⁵ IFESH, he said:

C'est quelqu'un qui connaît très mal les Nouveaux Programmes [...]. Il n'entretient pas des discussions intellectuelles. [...] Il dit qu'il va combattre ça jusqu'à sa mort et selon moi, moi je crois qu'il va mourir et les Nouveaux Programmes vont continuer. (24th January 2007, Cotonou)

The debate was thus highly controversial: while some saw in the New Study Programmes a broken airplane to be abandoned completely whether for political or personal reasons, others took it as the train to the future, but on incomplete and shaky tracks. The track setters had first of all failed to adequately inform and sensitize the population before the train arrived, they admitted. They had not reached the whole population with the philosophy behind the NSP, this being one of the reasons for its rejection. Ignorance of, or resistance to anti-authoritarian, innovative pedagogy left cracks on the tracks, and was in most of the discourses related to insufficient preparatory teacher training. The reopening of the three teacher training colleges in 2005/06 and the adaptation of teaching tools such as the reintroduction of the syllable method and the dictate in consequence of low learning results were seen as steps in the right direction by the critics. Nevertheless, there was something in the image of the state that continued to crumble: From the points of view of Ministry-related education experts and policy entrepreneurs, the state representatives at the Ministry of Education tried everything to keep the train on its tracks, while the wheels of the system, the teachers that were supposed to keep the system running, blocked. The price to adapt to the NSP, to absorb a completely new way of teaching, was high while their wages remained low (cf. Craig 1990: 52). Since 2001 not one school year has passed without teachers going on strike. In 2001/02 pupils of the CI and CP (the first two grades in primary school) had virtually less than ten normal school days during the normal school year (Lanoue 2004: 114). The year was not cancelled because teachers' trade unions agreed to extend the school year in order to catch up with parts of the curriculum.

From those unionists points of view, the image of the state was also crumbling but due to

²⁴ Educational Advisers (*Conseiller Pédagogiques*) assist the school inspectors in their daily affairs. Their number per school district depends on the number of schools. Since 2002 they have to be specially qualified to become Educational Advisers; before they were simply chosen by the inspector among the school district's school principals.

²⁵ This was the denomination used by a former director of INFRE (*Institut National, pour la Formation et la Recherche en Education*) for the American based international nongovernmental organisations that were carrying out USAID's project assistance and turning around USAID like satellites (23rd January 2007, Cotonou).

different reason: They saw themselves on the right tracks, trying to avert the collapse of the education system due to the top-down implementation of a New Study Programme that ignored their ideals and the needs and capacities on the ground. According to them the Beninese government had been lured by the promised assistance package and had sold the children's future to some donor's plan. They felt like the scapegoats of a government that tried to hide its own incapacities of a successful reform application and they saw their future in the reconstruction of the education system "from below".

The use of a "vertical topography of power" that places the state on top and the teachers below is an interesting tool of positioning, a tool of "spatializing the state" in the discourses above (Ferguson and Gupta 2002). But how do these discourses relate to the practices on the ground? Gupta and Sharma (2006: 10) note that the "focus on particular branches and levels of state institutions enables a disaggregated view of "the state" that shows the multilayered, pluri-centered, and fluid nature of this ensemble, that congeals different contradictions". In other words, it is the presentation of different actors' perceptions and deeds in different arenas of the state that help to explain what Ball (1998: 126) terms the "process of bricolage" in policy making. This process, in which the boundaries between above and below tend to blur, is in particular perceptible in discussions on financial aspects of the NSP to which I will turn in the following paragraph.

"Ils ont tous bouffés dedans" – money and politics

The financial side of the NSP is a very delicate topic. During field research I heard rumours that quite a big part of USAID's financial assistance had gone into the private pockets of civil servants who were charged with the programmes' execution. But the line between legal and illegal sources for enrichment was as hard to define as the line between truth and tale: government officials often worked as donor-paid consultants, and conference assistance offered goodly bonuses for civil servants' participation.

According to the professor of history, the reform was only implemented because there were so many dollars attached to it. He told stories of friends and colleagues, who were not able to buy a brick; who were not able to buy a bicycle. Then they started to get involved with the New Study Programmes and suddenly they were able to erect a two-storey building and to buy a brand new car. I should go to Porto Novo to visit the *Quartier Nouveaux Programmes* (the former *quartier Tokpota*) to see all the functionaries in their villas, in which, as one says, they even have telephones on the toilets! "They all had a bite of the big reform-cake", he said. That is why they could only criticise it in private. "You do not put sand in your food with the left hand, while you're eating with the right!"

Sarah beaucoup ne sont pas d'accord, mais beaucoup ne parlent pas pour deux raisons, ils ne parlent pas parce qu'ils n'ont pas l'occasion d'aller à la télé ou à la radio pour parler, mais ils en parlent entre amis. Mais il y en a qui n'en parlent pas tout en sachant que c'est mauvais parce qu'ils se disent c'est devenu la chose du gouvernement si je dis que c'est mauvais, le gouvernement va dire que je suis contre lui, et on ne pourra pas me nommer comme directeur à un poste. [...] On a tenté plusieurs fois de me corrompre: «professeur [...] écoute, venez avec nous! [...] Je sais que tu as déjà une maison mais c'est bon hein, viens avec nous.» Je dis mais, on va me taxer de lâche et de... corrompu. Ils disent «oh... est-ce qu'on va t'emprisonner pour ça? Les avantages sont officiels, donc il faut venir.» Ils faisaient parfois

jusqu'à trois ou quatre mois de séminaires à raison de 80.000 Franc CFA (about 122€)²⁶ par jour... (14th February 2007, Cotonou)

The professor had had several private audiences with the former president Kérékou and with the current president Yayi Boni to express his worries about the NSP. But, according to him, Kérékou had preferred to listen to others and to “eat his part of the cake” (6th January 2007, Cotonou).

I asked the field coordinator of the international nongovernmental organisation Aide et Action about the “NSP quarter” in Porto Novo. He said:

C'est vrai, ce n'ai pas faux il existe un quartier NPE, mais cela dit, c'est des grossissements. C'est vrai que les gens ont détourné de l'argent, et c'est là la conscience citoyenne. Moi je ne peux pas voler l'argent qui est destiné à acheter de livre pour les enfants. C'est ce que les gens ont fait pour construire le quartier NPE. Après on crie pour dire que les NPE ne sont pas bons. Les Nouveaux Programmes c'est un programme exigeant. Il faut du matériel, il faut que l'effectif soit limité, il faut que les enseignants soient bien formés. On donne de l'argent pour former les enseignants sur trois mois, [mais] parce qu'on veut mettre de l'argent en poche pour aller construire le quartier NPE, on forme les enseignants sur une semaine. Tous les syndicalistes qui crient là, ils se taisent parce que eux aussi trouvent leur compte dedans. Après ils disent que ça ne marche pas. Le ver est dans le fruit. [...] Le mouvement citoyen pour nous c'est amener les gens à comprendre que l'éducation est sacrée. Nous, on sait qu'on est en train de faire des efforts. Mais tant que les dirigeants, les hommes politiques, les cadres qui ont l'éducation...cela ne se comprend pas. (3rd February 2007, Cotonou)

The former head of the department for decentralisation and coordination at the Ministry of Education had a different opinion on the “NSP quarter” but shared the critique for greedy politicians:

S.F.: You're talking about the "Quartier NPE"?

D.G.: No, no, no. You come to Porto Novo, I'll take you to that place.

S.F.: Ok.

D.G.: There's nothing like that.

S.F.: Nothing? I heard a lot of rumours that...

D.G.: Uh, it's a lot of bullshit!

S.F.: Aha.

D.G.: Yes. It's a lot of bullshit! If you want to you come to Porto Novo and I'll take you there, you come with your camera please! Then we can cover everything and then you know the truth.

S.F.: Yeah, ok.

D.G.: When you go and see by yourself, then nobody can fool you, because even in the country many people are repeating that. They've never been there; they do not know what it is all about. It is something very simple. You know that the Ministry of Education is in Porto Novo. So many teachers are there and many education technicians are in Porto Novo. So they were in the same offices and schools and working in the administration and it was expensive to buy land in town. So they would all go far away. And it's like all those people they happened to be in the same surrounding because that was the place where you could get the land very cheap at that time. It happened that 20 years later, those people, who were teachers, directors, head masters in schools, they happened now to be inspectors and education technicians and they are working on the Nouveaux Programmes and they happened to be in the same area, not because they got a lot of money from the Nouveaux Programmes but because they have been there long before together! But because many of them are in the same

²⁶ The exchange rate used throughout the text: 1 Euro = 655.957 CFA Franc (<http://www.oanda.com/convert/classic>, last accessed: 25th October 2008)

place that is why it is Quartier Nouveaux Programmes, there are those houses that have been built with the money of the Nouveaux Programmes. But the houses that those people built they are [...] nothing else than average, middle class houses, that is, if you don't build those in Benin it's like you have wasted all your time, you know? The guys who are making the money, they are not the inspectors, the politicians are the ones, you see? They can get the money from everywhere, you know and do whatever they want and there is nothing to do about it! Yes! They mess up and they don't go to jail! It's wrong. It is wrong!

[...] You know, people are greedy, openly. What do you have for me? Ok, this is for the government, now what do you have for me? Ok, you take 2%. Ok, we are going to make a lot of books and the pedagogical materials and this and that and well, maybe you have 1%... [...]

S.F.: And what can you do to change this?

D.G.: Uh, it's already changed, we have another government [since 2006, S.F.]. Yes, and I think this government thinks differently [...] and works differently. They are making little mistakes, but that's normal. Yes, they will get back in tracks. I am sure they will. (22nd January 2007, Cotonou)

The mismanagement of resources by government officials in the initial phase of the programme was also an issue in Welmond's study on the Beninese reform process. In 1992 the ministry was asked to invest five million US\$ (a 25% counterpart to the first two tranches of the grant) as a nonsalary input into the education system in order to get the second tranche of USAID's non-project assistance.

Never before had so much money been earmarked for nonsalary expenditures. The disorganization of the budgetary process at all levels made spending so much money in such a short period of time quite daunting, and this was complicated by the fact that in 1992 action plans had not been finalized so that what constituted a reform-related expenditure was neither defined nor costed (Welmond 2002: 100).

In the end the Minister and his Cabinet implemented its "equipment" action plan and "flooded [the Ministry of Education, S.F.] with cars, motorcycles, computers, fax machines, and office furniture". USAID was not very happy about this investment; "it would have preferred the purchase of textbooks, school supplies, or even new school buildings over office equipment for bureaucrats" but excused the decision with the short timeframe and the ministry's lack of experience and managerial expertise (ibid). The former head of the department for decentralisation and coordination said:

It's like a Marshall-Plan that we are implementing the wrong way. Yes, because instead of developing capacities at the local stage, people are pumping money into the budget and the money that has been put into the national budget for education is doing other things! Politicians are getting rich! Filthy rich, dirty rich with that money! (22nd January 2007, Cotonou)

Did the "non-project assistance" fail as a policy instrument favoured by USAID?

Non-project assistance? It did. And why did it fail? It's a matter of context, always. [...] Early 90s when we were just fresh out of the woods, Marxism and everything [...], there was a lot of money in non-project assistance and then the people, they potlatched the money. That was really bad governance! (9th January 2008, Porto Novo)

Pressman and Wildavsky (1984: 136ff.) draw an analogy between "certain structural features affecting federal assistance to cities", as in their case study of a public works programme in Oakland, California, and the underlying difficulties in the transfer of foreign aid:

Failure to implement may result either from overestimation of what can be accomplished or from underestimation of ability to implement. Each error can be explained by structural features of relations between aid givers and recipients under conditions of stress. [...] The donor nation or international organisation is set up to grant funds to a variety of recipients. Whether it has a lot to give or just a little, the granting organisation must get rid of what it has. It is a mover of money. Its task is to remove a certain amount of money from its coffers in the time period allotted. [...] For the host country, foreign aid is both an opportunity and a problem. It is an opportunity to overcome the perennial shortage of funds for investment; it is a problem because it is not easy to determine which projects should be supported and because the expenditures always include local funds that are in perpetually short supply. To the degree that the recipient nation is not subject to powerful central direction, various autonomous organisations and ministries may make separate arrangements with the granting organisation.

This general observation seems quite valid for the Benin case (and for the case of Niger; see Tidjani Alou 1996: 72f). The ideal budgeting strategies imagined by the donors were in conflict with local practical orientations on how to deal with the money. The non-project assistance that was provided to the national budget was hardly transferred from the Ministry of Finance to the financial direction and the ones responsible for the elaboration of the NSP at the Ministry of Education. There were rumours that the Ministry of Finance was using parts of the financial assistance designated for the transformation of the education sector, to bypass its own cashouts (Welmond 2002: 117, note 7). “By December 1993 only CFA15 million [22.867.40€ S.F.] out of a total of over CFA100 million [152.449€ S.F.] budgeted were actually disbursed.” (Welmond 2002: 101).

According to the former head of the *Direction de l'inspection et la vérification interne* at the Ministry of Education the biggest problem in realising the reform was the mandatory attitude prevailing in Benin. USAID and the government had first of all “chucked the money about”, luring the personnel, before asking for a higher price, i.e. more work without an increase in wages, in the end. He said that the teacher who took part in the experimental phase got bonuses for the extra-time training. During the phase of the generalisation this bonus ceased to apply, causing teacher to go on strike. During the experimental phase teaching manuals were free, now they had to be paid for. All this was causing a lot of unrest. (16th March 2006, Porto Novo)

The former head of the department for decentralisation and coordination said that this extra-time teacher training was not even taking place:

[T]hey didn't THINK about a teacher training before the money came! So they said, ok, training, training, training, training... welcome for training and then they thought, ok, what's the training about? Well, we don't know. [...] There was money to spend, they put teachers together, they say stuff, they pay and they go home and they learned nothing and they didn't use anything. (22nd January 2007, Cotonou)

Teachers were, according to the voices cited above, more interested in per diem-bonuses than in the transfer of competencies (cf. Jordan Smith 2003) and Ministers were more interested in keeping unionists silent by “revalorizing” their profession than by fulfilling the complexities of action plans. Welmond (2002: 104) writes:

In 1996 Minister Padonou decided that resources allocated for teacher training should be redistributed to teachers at the beginning of the school year, during a yearly ‘orientation’ meeting. Each teacher received 20.000 CFA francs (about 30.50€ S.F., approximately one third of a month’s salary) for the purported objective of purchasing supplies needed to commence the year.

All this information should be handled with care, though. Corruption is a topic easily evoked in discourse but it is hard to grasp the phenomena empirically and from a non-normative stance (cf. Anders 2002; Blundo and Olivier de Sardan 2006). What is important for my study is the *idea* of the state that is transported in these discourses. As Gupta (1995: 376) writes: “The discourse of corruption turns out to be a key arena through which the state, citizens, and other organizations and aggregations come to be imagined”. There were difficulties with the management of resources allocated to the Beninese government for its education reform and this definitely hurt the population, but there were also some people who worked hard to conceptualise and implement the reform and they had to be adequately remunerated according to one of the former reform pilots:

[I]l y a un principe qui dit que quand quelqu’un travaille, il faut le payer. [...] Ce principe a été respecté, les gens ont travaillé, ils ont été payés. [...] En 94, j’ai passé un mois et demi à Lokossa avec mes coéquipiers pour élaborer les programmes du CI et du CP [first and second grade, S.F.]. On ne dormait pas. [...] En suite c’est malsain quand les gens disent qu’il y avait beaucoup d’argent dedans, ça frise la jalousie ils ne sont pas capables de faire le travail. Il y a des gens que j’avais invités à Lokossa quand je travaillais là bas, ils n’ont pas pu tenir le rythme. Et c’est eux qui racontent des coups pour dire qu’il y a beaucoup d’argent dedans, ...mais avec beaucoup de travail. (16th February 2007, Cotonou)

The fruits of this hard work were nevertheless hard to find by frustrated parents, pupils and teachers, especially when they knew how much money had been involved in the reform. A parent in Nikki told me:

Moi je dis que sincèrement le Nouveau Programme c’est très bon. Seulement que aussi, il ne faut pas vouloir le faire pour sa poche, il faut vraiment sentir que c’est un besoin ressenti par les populations. [...] Le financement qu’il faut jusqu’à présent ne vient pas. Il faut financer nécessairement l’éducation, sinon on ne va pas atteindre l’objectif là. On peut engloutir des milliards, ça sera nul. (11th March 2007, Nikki centre)

More than peanuts: politics, aid and “the war on leadership”

The discontent with the New Study Programme’s implementation process articulated by teachers, parents, and the donor community in combination with an increase in teacher strikes for higher salaries, reclassification and – in the most radical cases – the withdrawal of the NSP, urged the government to react. In February 2007 a National Forum on Education was launched by the government and financed by the UNESCO in order to regain control of the education discourse and to negotiate solutions to the education sector’s most pressing problems. The 400 invited guests (politicians, practitioners in the education sector, representatives of teacher trade unions, representatives of parent associations, education experts and representatives of the donor community)²⁷ apparently received a minimum per diem of 32.000 Francs CFA (about 48.80€) per day during the five days of the forum.²⁸ This led uninvited critics like the professor of history to the conclusion that the forum was mainly set up to silence rebellious trade unionists and that the government’s stress on negotiation and problem solving was merely a rhetorical device (14th February 2007, Cotonou). In his opening speech the president of the republic, Yayi Boni, said:

Le Forum National sur le Secteur de l’Education qui commence ce lundi 12 février 2007 est un rendez-vous de grande portée historique de notre pays. C’est un moment porteur d’espoir,

²⁷ See list of participants in République du Bénin (2007: 185ff.).

²⁸ For participants who came from outside of Cotonou the per diem was higher but I did not manage to receive any precise information.

espoir de revoir le Bénin se repositionner dans le peloton des pays ayant les meilleurs systèmes éducatifs en Afrique. L'affirmation d'Emmanuel Mounier selon laquelle «Le Dahomey est le quartier latin de l'Afrique», réveille en nous Béninois le sentiment d'une gloire lointaine. En effet, vous conviendrez avec moi que le système éducatif béninois traverse actuellement une crise marquée notamment par: **Primo**: une utilisation massive d'enseignants non qualifiés à tous les niveaux, liée à l'expansion rapide des effectifs scolaires et au gel des recrutements dans la fonction publique; **Secundo**: la réforme des programmes d'études dont la mise en œuvre est pour le moins sujette à caution; **Tertio**: une baisse inquiétante du niveau d'engagement et d'encadrement pédagogique des enseignants dont l'ardeur au travail est émoussée par les difficultés liées à leurs conditions de vie et de travail, ce qui influe négativement sur l'efficacité du système et la qualité de ses produits; [...] j'ai noté auprès de nos compatriotes, l'urgence du règlement des problèmes qui minent le secteur éducatif et plombent son développement. Dans ce cadre, j'ai toujours bénéficié d'une écoute attentive de la communauté internationale. (Reprinted in: République du Bénin, 2007: 8f.)

The international community had pointed to the deficits in teacher training for quite a while, but despite its high appreciation among education experts and practitioners, in-service teacher training projects like the PTTP funded by USAID and carried out by IFESH remained pretty much a drop in the ocean. National nongovernmental organisations (NGOs) doubted that they could get involved in this field as it seemed to them like one of the last bastions of the state. An employee of the *Association pour la Protection de l'Enfance Malheureuse* (APEM) said:

C'est bon de participer au forum là parce que le problème même de l'éducation c'est le problème du manque d'enseignants, du problème de niveau des enseignants qui sont là, tout ça là, ça veut dire c'est ça qui empire les choses. Même nous-mêmes en tant qu'ONG, pour le moment on a ce problème là. Mais c'est du ressort de l'Etat, il ne revient pas à l'ONG de parler du niveau de formation d'un enseignant. C'est l'Etat, sinon on ne va pas s'entendre avec l'Etat. Ce n'est pas à nous de dire à l'Etat ceux que tu mets pour enseigner là ne valent pas. Ce n'est pas de notre ressort. (23rd February 2007, Parakou)

With this point of view, that teacher training was rather a domain of the state than of a local NGO like APEM, the employee constructed a "spatial hierarchy" of state and non-state action as Ferguson and Gupta (2002) would see it. In this hierarchy the local NGO positioned itself at the bottom, unable to criticise the government for its neglect of teacher training. International NGOs like IFESH and donors such as USAID were however in a different position. The legitimacy of their "transnational governmentality"²⁹ was not questioned but rather seen to stand above the state.

According to the head of the Basic Education Team at USAID teacher training remained a top priority within the donor organisation's action plan. This included not only further in-service teacher training programmes for community teachers and a strengthening of existing in-service teacher training networks but also a training of trainers for the instructors teaching future teachers in the three recently reopened teacher training colleges.³⁰ An important part of the past and ongoing process of administrative and social engineering in Benin is thus taken care of by its inter- and transnational financial and technical partners. There is not only one

²⁹ On Foucault's history of governmentality, the "ensemble formed by the institutions, procedures, analyses and reflections, the calculations and tactics that allow the exercise of this very specific albeit complex form of power, which has its target population, as its principal form of knowledge political economy, and as its essential technical means apparatuses of security" see Foucault (1991). For a critical discussion on the use of Foucault by American anthropologists of the state like Sharma and Gupta (2006) see Bierschenk (in print).

³⁰ For a detailed ethnography on the every day life in the teacher training college of Djougou, focussing in particular on the differences between a rhetorical glorification of the New Study Programmes by the instructors and its practical disregard in the student's training see Hällmayer (2007).

state at work in education; there are *states* at work, next to other transnational players. Discussions on their practices of intervention often go beyond purely financial and technical issues; they can turn into debates on geopolitical and ideological aspects of dependency.

The professor of history told me, for instance, that some people thought that he was bought by the French to be against the New Study Programmes (24th January 2007). That he was guided by French interests was indeed mentioned by the national representative of IFESH who said:

Il est guidé par les intérêts Français. Parce que les NPE ont été supporté techniquement et financièrement par les Américains, évidemment lui il parle sans le savoir au nom du gouvernement Français, au nom des intérêts Français. [...]

S.F.: Pourquoi il est guidé par les intérêts Français?

M.D.: Bon, parce que les Français [...] estiment que les Américains sont en train d'endosser le système éducatif au Bénin! Ah, ah, ah! Ici par exemple, tout ce qui concerne le Secondaire, ça c'est la chasse gardée des Français.

S.F.: Ah oui?

M.D.: Oui, ce sont les Français qui dominent dans le Secondaire, tu vois? Et ici les Américains ont décidé ça c'est par rapport à la demande du gouvernement Béninois, de supporter la réforme du Primaire. Alors, est-ce que lui il a donné une proposition par rapport à cette réforme là? Il fait les critiques mais il ne donne pas une alternative! [...] beaucoup de gens qui critiquent, comme j'ai dit bien, quand c'est une critique philosophique c'est parce qu'ils n'ont pas été impliqués et ils estiment que ceux qui ont fait ça ont eu beaucoup à manger et ils n'ont pas eu à manger et ils parlent de ça. (24th January 2007, Cotonou)

According to a technical consultant in charge of the French funded governmental programme PAGE (*Projet d'Appui à la Gestion de l'Education*), it is not true that the French cooperation is only active in secondary education or even driven out of the arena of education support by American donors. PAGE has been going on since 2001. It is a programme that provides technical support to the administration of education in all the ministries, having an eye on human resource management, the decentralisation process, the production of statistical data in the primary sector and the coordination of "Education for All" and "Fast Track"³¹ initiatives. She said that in fact the Americans are not very much involved anymore since the official ending of the support for the New Study Programmes in 2007. They had their lead in the 1990s. In what concerns primary education it is now the European Union, the German KfW (*Kreditanstalt für Wiederaufbau*) and DANIDA (Danish International Development Assistance) who take the lead. USAID does not work with the Ministry, and is not supporting the Fast Track Initiative (29th February 2008, Cotonou).

The concurrence between French and US-American donors was however mentioned by quite a few of my interview partners. The former Minister of Education during the revolution went so far to say:

[C]'est une guerre maintenant entre la France et les Etats-Unis ici. Qui va contrôler le système éducatif béninois ? [...] la France elle-même dit à ses anciennes colonies, je me désengage, prenez-vous en charge, pendant qu'il dit ça, les Etats-Unis aussi, du point de vue de la

³¹ The „Education For All – Fast Track Initiative“ (EFA-FTI) for accelerated progress in reaching “universal primary school completion (UPC), for boys and girls alike, by 2015 [...] was established in 2002. [...] It is a new compact for the education sector that explicitly links increased donor support for primary education to recipient countries’ policy performance and accountability for results. Initiated by 22 bilateral donors, development banks, and international agencies active in supporting education in low-income countries, the FTI is co-chaired on a rotating basis by one G-8 and one non-G-8 donor, supported by a Steering Committee, and a Secretariat that is housed in and managed by the World Bank” (EFA-FTI 2004: 3).

géostratégie, les Etats-Unis aussi veulent s'implanter dans les pays africains d'expression française; [...] les Etats-Unis s'impliquent beaucoup dans le système éducatif du Bénin. IFESH, USAID, World Education tout ça, les Américains veulent gagner du terrain dans notre système. Ce qu'il faut pour nous, c'est de ne pas lâcher prise, c'est de ne pas laisser quelqu'un, aucun pays nous maîtriser. C'est nous qui devrions rédiger nos programmes, compte tenu de notre niveau de développement. (23rd January 2007, Cotonou)

I asked the current head of the department for decentralisation and cooperation at the Ministry of Education and his vice-directors for their point of view on this "battlefield". He said:

Moi je suis historien et il y a ce qu'on appelle le pacte [néo S.F.]-colonial. Pour accéder à l'indépendance il y a un certain nombre de choses qu'on avait arrêté avant de nous donner l'indépendance. Et après l'indépendance il y a le pacte [néo S.F.]-colonial, ça veut dire si le Bénin doit acheter, il doit acheter chez la France. Si la France doit vendre, la France doit vendre au Bénin. Bon maintenant que nous nous tournions un peu vers l'Amérique... (26th February 2008, Porto Novo)

His vice-director interrupted him and said: "Mais tout ça là, c'est dépassé!" The head of department continued:

non, non, attention! Le pacte [néo S.F.]-colonial existe toujours! Et je vais te dire une chose: Aujourd'hui ceux qui disent Nouveaux Programmes à bas, si tu cherches, tu fouilles dedans, tu verras les mains de la France dedans. Je te jure. C'est parce qu'ils ont l'impression que le Bénin est en train de leur échapper en allant vers les Amériques. (26th February 2008, Porto Novo)

The vice-director interrupted once more:

Je voulais juste intervenir si vous le permettez, c'est à dire que, l'homme de par sa nature est possessif. L'homme veut posséder ce qu'il a. C'est à dire que la France ne voudra jamais, quelque soit ce que nous disons que nous avons évolué, que nous sommes indépendants etc., la France ne voudra pas, ou aura cette attitude de conserver ces anciennes colonies. Ça c'est en l'homme. Mais je crois que nous devons aller au delà de cela et être indépendant, diversifier nos sources de coopération. C'est vrai ils ne voudront jamais qu'on leur échappe, mais il est temps aujourd'hui de façon autonome, de façon indépendante que nous allions vers ce qui est bon pour nous; que nous allions vers les partenaires qui vont faire le bonheur de nos systèmes, sans tenir compte des états d'âmes. (26th February 2008, Porto Novo)

But how influential were American and French donors really? What was rumour based on dependency and conspiracy theory, what was based on facts? What role did the Canadian experts play that were sent to Benin to technically support the reform? Why did, on the one hand Babagbeto, the former USAID coordinator of the Primary Education Reform Programme insist on saying in an interview in the *Bulletin d'Echanges Pédagogiques* (BEP, 2005: 25) that

Par conséquent et contrairement à ce que d'aucuns croient et à ce que d'autres prétendent, la décision d'une réforme du système éducatif ainsi que celle de son orientation ont été prises par le Bénin en toute souveraineté. J'insiste pour affirmer, s'il en est encore besoin, que les Nouveaux Programmes d'Etudes sont bel et bien une initiative béninoise et que les documents pédagogiques qui les sous-tendent sont conçus et rédigés par des spécialistes béninois vivant au Bénin.

And why did Lanoue (2004: 113), a researcher affiliated with the *Centre d'Etude d'Afrique Noire*, conclude on the other hand:

[I]l n'est pas abusif de parler dans le cas du Bénin d'une administration supra-nationale du système éducatif concurrente des administrations nationales. (...) Les bailleurs de fonds américains prennent en charge l'ensemble des questions d'ordre pédagogique dans le cadre d'une réforme d'envergure nationale, la «pédagogie» leur est donc dévolue.

While the image of the state evoked by ancient and current Beninese politicians resembles a historically dependent and financially weak player who is nevertheless capable of using its *marge de manoeuvre* to negotiate and to play donors off against each other (cf. the "cunning state" in Randeria 2003)³², the images given by Babagbeto and Lanoue in the quotes above stress either autonomy or dependency. The truth, in my opinion, is somewhere in between.

To summarise: The New Study Programmes were inspired and guided by Canadian expertise, financed by USAID but formulated and implemented by Beninese reform pilots and their staff. The implementation process was hampered by a number of problems, mainly related to a mismanagement of human and financial resources running through all levels: from the Ministry of Education at the top to the teaching staff on the ground. Insufficient teacher training, whether not in offer or not in demand, led to an inadequate application of the reform and unsatisfactory results (cf. Midling et al. 2005). The reform demands a complete shift in pedagogy and in the understanding of the child, which cannot be internalised on one day but has to be understood, experienced and approached creatively, not in a rigid, literal manner. Structural constraints such as class sizes of more than 100 pupils due to fast increasing enrolment rates, teacher shortages and the slow provision of new classrooms aggravate the situation.

Where are the links between these facts and a geopolitical French-American war on leadership? Tidjani Alou (1996: 68) writes about donor action in national arenas:

Chaque agent de coopération imprime donc son propre champ politique sur l'espace national où il agit et ce champ politique est structuré selon les logiques qui lui sont propres et qui se transforment au gré des situations nationales du pays donateur.

Benin was a French colony and its education system remains strongly influenced by French traditions. These traditions, for instance the final exam in primary schools, were kept in Benin despite its abolition in France.³³ But France's influence is not only institutional. The current head of the department for decentralisation and cooperation at the Ministry of Education pointed to the *pacte néo-colonial*, the special relationship between former colonies and their colonial powers. The former reform pilot and inspector at the head office for primary education at the Ministry explained the consequences of breaching this pact in the production of school manuals:

[D]epuis qu'on a commencé par élaborer les programmes, les manuels sont produits au Bénin ici! Ils sont rédigés au Bénin! Ils sont produits au Bénin et les imprimeries sont au Bénin! (*He wispers confidentially*) Tu comprends ce que ça veut dire? C'est des milliards... Ce n'est plus des livres qui viennent d'ailleurs pour être vendu au Bénin! [...] Ca fait des manques à gagner aux gens! Ils ne peuvent pas être contents ceux qui ont perdu ce marché là ! [...] C'est eux, tu as dit le mot, c'est les Français. Donc, tu vois, il y a un enjeu très économique là dedans. (9th January 2008)

³² For Randeria (2003: 306) "[w]e are faced not by weak, or weakening, states but by cunning states, which capitalize on their perceived weakness in order to render themselves unaccountable both to their citizens and to international institutions".

³³ According to Bierschenk (2008) this institutional time lag is a common feature of other sectors of the Beninese public service as well.

Benin is an aid-dependent country and money is power. USAID had given financial and technical support to the public-private printing partnership, using local printers to produce 1.7 million French and mathematics textbooks (<http://www.usaid.gov/bj/education/s-pubprivpartner.html>, 15th May 2008).

In the French textbooks used in fifth grades (CM1) the official USAID school book launch is the subject of one reading unit under the title: “*De nouveaux manuels pour les élèves*”. One pupil tells another one about the event and reads out the speech held by the representative of USAID. It starts:

Dans le domaine de l’enseignement, l’USAID soutient la réforme en œuvrant pour la formation de citoyens autonomes, capables d’entreprendre, capables de se prendre en charge, animés d’esprit de méthode, de coopération et du goût de responsabilité. (INFRE 2003: 154)

In the textbook for sixth graders (CM2) pupils learn how to write a “demande d’assistance” directed at a nongovernmental organisation. The example shows the little boy Tayé who needs to buy glasses but who cannot afford them (INFRE 2004: 15).

In my opinion these examples show quite clearly the influence of US-American donors and experts; an influence that was once exerted by the French colonial power in generating their colonies’ curriculum on (European) history and geography (cf. examples given by Tidjani Alou 2008: 20f.). The examples cited above do not only point to different international influences, illustrating the change from a “francophonised” state to a neoliberalised version in accordance with the US-prototype, they also carry different images of the state: In the textbooks financed by USAID there are powerful organisations apart from the state that care for poor people’s concerns. The young Beninese citizen is prepared for a situation marked by parastate, nonstate, and twilight institutions (cf. Lund 2006) even in such core sectors of the state such as education and health. When I asked sixth graders in the public primary school of Maro in the municipality of Nikki whether they knew what an NGO is, one girl answered: “Oui, elle peut aider la population”. I asked for an example and another girl said: “Nous avons l’ONG APEM. Elle s’occupe des enfants démunis”. A boy raised his finger: “USAID ça peut aider la maman et le grand frère” (5th December 2006). USAID and APEM were well known in this school through their visible support of 36 girl orphans. The girls wear uniforms with the imprint of the donor: “USAID – from the American people” (see photo on text cover).

The girl-child-sponsorship is just one example of USAID’s project support in the reform context that gradually replaced the non-project assistance. According to the former head of the department for decentralisation and cooperation at the Ministry of Education:

Project assistance works better because when the Americans write their request for application for a certain project and big American firms apply, those firms they better give results because if they don’t they are not hired again. So some firms were recruited to do the job and they had to show results and this is how things moved kind of smoothly at the primary level. (9th January 2008, Cotonou)

The country director of Creative Associates, one of the American firms contracted by USAID, told Brandecker (2007: 74) that this “American way to keep your money at home” is “scandalous” from an ethical point of view.

Is this aid-tying to American firms and USAID’s satellite-NGOs a *pacte néolibéral* replacing the *pacte néocolonial*? How far is it from support to dependency? A statistician working for the international nongovernmental organisation Catholic Relief Services told me:

Les gens disent aujourd'hui que notre constitution c'est peut être un laboratoire où, parce qu'on n'a pas de l'argent, on vient expérimenter des choses pour voir comment ça marche. Bon! [...] Si vous ne demandez pas l'argent de lui, faites ce que vous voulez chez vous! Donc là, ça revient toujours au problème de bien diriger son pays, d'avoir des ressources et d'avoir d'autorité pour faire ce qu'on veut. Si nos Chefs d'Etats n'ont pas cette conscience, toujours on viendra nous imposer des choses ou bien on voudra faire autrement. Moi je trouve que c'est normal. La seule chose c'est de se libérer, à mon avis. Aujourd'hui, même votre pays, c'est parce que vous vous suffisez que les Américaines ne peuvent pas venir vous dire faites ceci, faites ceci... (3rd January 2007, Cotonou)

Financial dependency or, to be more precise, extraversion, i.e. "the creation and the capture of a rent generated by dependency" (Bayart 2000: 222),³⁴ is in my opinion just one side of the coin. The other side represents normative constraints on how a decent, modern state and its institutions should look like. Educational policy making, whether in Benin or in Germany, takes place in a highly internationalised and transnationalised arena. The OECD Programme for International Student Assessment (PISA) established for example new European benchmarks for educational quality and shocked the German government and public with a devastating evaluation of its, for so long highly valued, education system. This had severe political consequences, for example accelerated efforts for a better integration of immigrants' children and more support for all-day-schools. The provision of educational services is still a norm for a functioning, modern statehood, but education is no longer considered as merely a public good to serve the public good; it is a global good to serve the global good. Internationally valued educational concepts are spread around the globe. While world culture institutionalists like Meyer, Nagel, and Snyder (1993) focus on the ways in which these concepts are spread harmoniously as part of a wider, rational world culture expressed foremost in policy documents, the local debates presented here point to the conflicting dimensions of educational policy making in transnational arenas (cf. Anderson-Levitt 2003). In this process multilateral institutions and programmes seem to take the lead in defining a new global education order (cf. Lange and Diarra 2001; Lange 2003; King 1999, 2007).

Donor support beyond the New Study Programmes: "Fast Track" politics

With the ending of USAID's budget support in 2005 American agencies lost their supremacy in the Beninese education sector. Some of USAID's satellite-NGOs have hardly any ongoing projects left. Just like the technical consultant in charge of the French funded governmental programme PAGE said: the Americans are not taking part in the Fast Track Initiative, the new leading framework for accelerated progress in reaching the Millennium Goal of Universal Primary School Completion by 2015. I had the chance to interview the World Bank education specialist who participated in the appraisal of Benin's Fast Track Plan based on its strategic ten year plan for educational development. He explained:

[T]he World Bank is the fiduciary manager for the funds of the Fast Track Initiative, which are funds coming from a 32 countries, if I am not mistaken, and we are just here to make sure that those funds can be disbursed, you know, with all the conditions for efficiency and good governance practice. So we are at a stage now where we are appraising, meaning that we are checking their programme, checking their fiduciary organisation, checking all the covenants and regulatory aspects of it and, ehm, if the answer is yes and nothing is missing, then we can go to the next step, I hope pretty soon we can negotiate the finance, the grant. And it is a grant of 76.2 million US\$, so it's very important. [...] [T]his money will be provided by tranche to the budget

³⁴ Bayart (2000: 234) sees this dependency as "a historical process, a matrix of action, rather than a structure – as dependency theory, using a metaphor implying immobility, generally conceives it to be".

but it will go directly to the budget of education, it will not go to the national budget. (5th March 2008, Cotonou)

In addition to its leading role in the Fast Track Initiative, the World Bank is very active in the amelioration of national education statistics, helping to come up with a country statist report, the RESEN (*Rapport d'Etat sur le Système Educatif National*) every four years (cf. République du Bénin; World Bank; UNESCO-BREDA 2008). The RESEN is like a “radioscopy” of the education sector. It is supposed to be “work in common, [...] a joined product with the government and with the partners.” But the problem in Benin is that

they still have a very poor information system and a very poor management [...] which means that many issues they don't know. So there are tendencies to take for granted their results, you know, they have, I don't know, an enrolment rate of 100%, so they say, hah, it's a 100%, it is fine! In fact they don't know! And in fact WE know because WE have some additional data and there are many, many, many kids out of school, but they have no clue how many. That's just one example. Or yesterday we were discussing teachers, right? They have indicators that say okay, well, we will do inspections every year. All teachers will be inspected. That's the blabla! Now, more or less we know that only 20% are inspected. So, the inspection system is not working. [...] Ehm, same thing for the gratuity. They say, oh, there is gratuity. But in fact somewhere there are parents who are paying for their kids' education, but they don't know. (5th March 2008, Cotonou)

The World Bank plays its role of a “knowledge bank” (cf. Mehta 2001). The Bank produces and provides knowledge about the country's state of development, according to the Bank to “help the government in policy making” (5th March 2008, Cotonou), and, according to my point of view, to legitimate its funding strategies in the area of intervention (cf. Samoff 1993). This knowledge delivery stands quite in contrast to the philosophy behind the New Study Programmes, pushing pupils to go on an active search for knowledge as part of their formation into self-dependent, creative citizens of tomorrow. Apparently, this is not asked of national policy makers. The Fast Track needs its tracks fast if the train heading towards primary Education for All in 2015 should reach its final destination. The main problem here is according to the World Bank specialist:

the lack of institutional capacity. Not because people are not competent, it's not that... It's just because the right people are not at the right place. So we have a hundred of examples that we are discussing with people who have a position but who do not have the capacity. And just next to him there is a young guy who has the capacity but doesn't have the position. Or you are dealing with someone and you are working very well with this person, this person is very competent and one month later this person is removed. So this government wants to do a lot of things but it's not the kind of government you can trust in terms of... I wouldn't say governance it's more, it's more the institutional mess. [...] This is the weakest government I have ever seen! (*laughs*) No...eh, it has some strengths but it's that: the weakness of the strength: it's a mega-government. (5th March 2008, Cotonou)

From the point of view of donor agencies the state apparatus is thus not only a development partner and owner as defined in the Paris Declaration on Aid Effectiveness in 2005 (OECD 2005), but at the same time an object of intervention that has to be developed through capacity building (cf. Tidjani Alou 1996: 65; King 1991: 276). I wondered if the “institutional mess” addressed by the World Bank specialist was also perceived as such inside the Ministry. The former head of the department for decentralisation and cooperation explained to me:

[T]hat is one of the reasons why I resigned from my position: we used to have a very good organisation at the beginning of Yayi Boni's mandate. The organisation would be that [...] all

the directors would make their *planification* and on the basis of that planning they say that this is what I want to do in a month, this is what I want to do in a quarter, in a term and this is what I want to do for the year. And we have monthly meetings, where every director will make the point. [...] And we did that for two months and the minister was changed. That minister was changed because she appointed a *directeur du cabinet* that did not show respect to the head of State or something like that. [...] That was August 15th 2006. [...] And then we had another minister, who was staying from August 2006 to June or July 2007 and things were really different. We dropped the planning, we dropped everything and from that on the head of State would be giving directives all the way from the presidential system. [...] We started classes in October and on October 14th, the *gratuité de l'école* was decreed and we heard about it on TV like everybody.³⁵ I said: HOW? Did I miss something? I never heard about it! So in October, right when schools started: *gratuité!* We had to go all over the country... When I went for the first week I told people: *la donnée de l'accès va être résolue. Maintenant nous allons concentrer sur la qualité.* And I was saying it very sincerely. Then the second week the head of State said: *Tous les ministres vont sur le terrain pour parler de la gratuité!* I said: wow, this is terrific; such a commitment of the head of State for education! And then the ministers went into the villages and they started talking about politics! And I understood, and that is very personal, that everything was in preparation of the parliamentary elections. I said: Is someone bullshitting me? I'm not going anywhere. Then I talked to the minister and said: I'm not in this anymore; don't talk to me about this anymore. Then we stopped and they said *préparation du forum.*³⁶ And the forum was planned for December. Between October and December the ministry was like closed down and everyone was to go on the field for *la gratuité* and then in December: *il faut tenir le forum...* We couldn't do it and we did it in February. And after the forum in February: *Service National. Il faut le faire.*³⁷ And then decisions were falling out, raining out from the presidency, so the directors did not have anything to do but run left and right on the decisions of the president. That's why I said, from a macro-economic view it's very good, but from a systemic micro-view it is not good because systems are not functioning. So that's where we are today. And when we got to that point I said, well, I don't know why I'm a director, I have other things to do. I am an independent person and I do things for myself [...] and I wanted to do theology like years back... (9th January 2008, Porto Novo)

His hopes, articulated one year before, that the management of the education sector would get back on technical tracks, leaving political ambitions behind, were severely damaged. Politically staged innovations steamrolled the country and produced change-reluctant actors not only in the Ministry. But the hierarchical innovation modus (cf. Elwert 2000: 88) had also its supporters. The former director's successor explained:

Cependant, l'objectif du chef de l'Etat en le faisant, c'est clair : [...] c'est pour que les choses aillent vite. Il faut aller à son rythme. Et si les gens ne sont pas prêt à aller à son rythme, il veut les remplacer par d'autres pour que ça aille plus vite. (26th February 2008, Porto Novo)

These “Fast Track” politics of the President can be seen as a prolongation and radicalisation of what Welmond (2002:110) describes as the “rehabilitation agenda” unofficially supported by the Ministry of Education during the implementation process of the NSP. Officially, the government and the donor had agreed upon a systemic reform agenda to be implemented. This systemic agenda was based on an input-output-model of education and aimed at long-

³⁵ On October 14th the president publicly announced free education for all, based on the communiqué n°17/SGG/COM/EXTRA published on 12th October 2006 about the general state budget for 2007, which included a complementary subvention to render basic education free of charge.

³⁶ Referring to the National Forum on Education held in February 2007.

³⁷ The *Service National* or *Service Militaire d'Intérêt National* was the reintroduction of a compulsory one-year military service for all citizens between 18 to 35 years, holding a professional or academic degree. After one month of military formation and one month of pedagogical training, the young recruits were sent to teach for one school year in nursery, primary and secondary schools throughout the country. The decision was announced by government in May 2007 and passed the National Assembly in September 2007.

term effects. The rehabilitation agenda in contrast was based on the assumption that the education system was in a state of crisis and in need of immediate and visible measures for improvement.

One thing is clear: the Ministers of Education and the funding agencies did not promote the same reform agenda for much of the time. This had a tremendous effect on the reform effort, as each actor brought to bear different policy instruments and types of power. In addition, technical staff members in the Ministry of Education were not united behind one agenda or another, which led to a significant degree of infighting and delays in implementation (Welmond 2002: 113).³⁸

And so the struggle continues with different actors pulling on different ends. Teacher trade unions continue to go on strike for their professional revalorisation and a “patriotisation” of the NSP through the introduction of national languages, while the Ministry of Education tries to set the tracks and sensitise the population in areas that were steamrolled by the introduction of the NSP and the decisions of the head of State on free access and military services in schools. The military constructs schools in rural areas which are called “Ecoles Yayi Boni” (after the current president) by the population, but hard to find on the virtually non-existent school maps. While the head of the department for decentralisation and cooperation at the Ministry does not know how many donors actually intervene in the education sector and in which domain³⁹, but does know of a conflicting relationship between French and American donors during the NSP implementation process, World Bank representatives seem to be better informed on the state of the education system than the Ministry itself. What do we have here: a playground for educational reform or a battlefield of donor intervention or both?

Conclusion

In this article I presented local debates on primary education and the New Study Programmes in Benin. I told the story of how I experienced complex aspects of educational policy making, seen as a process of bricolage, during my research.

The New Study Programmes were a systemic reform introduced from above as a means of democratisation into a context of democratisation. The aim of the reform was nothing less than the development of an education system that was able to produce a new type of citizen: autonomous, self-dependent and reflective. But the reform context was not one of autonomy but of reliance on foreign financial and technical aid. The fact that USAID, a new donor in the Beninese arena of foreign assistance, became the primary supporter of the reform programme, and North America its main source for pedagogical inspiration, led to fierce debates about geopolitical factors in development cooperation. Critics of the New Study Programme were said to have been spurred by the French, Benin’s former colonial power, important economic partner and prior role model for educational policy making. This line of debate, which turns the education system into a battlefield of donor intervention, is still widely discussed today, despite the recent shift to donor diversification and intensified cooperation within the framework of the Fast Track Initiative.

³⁸ Cf. Craig (1990) for a general discussion on the problems of educational policy implementation in Africa related to immediate political concerns and conflicting relationships between agencies due to a lack of communication.

³⁹ I had asked for a list of donors and international NGOs engaged in the Beninese education sector since the beginning of my research in 2006 but it was not until February 2008 that I got an incomplete version of the list that the Ministry is trying to establish.

Other lines of debate, which structured educational discourses at the time of my research in Benin, concerned pedagogical and structural shortcomings of the NSP. The programmes were based on a new pedagogical approach, the “competence approach”, which stood in contrast to traditional teaching methods and the traditional perception of the child in major parts of Beninese society. The approach stood also in contrast to structural constraints such as an insufficient number of sufficiently trained teachers and disproportional class sizes. The renunciation of the “competence approach”, the core feature of the NSP, was out of question for reform implementers. They introduced some “corrective measures” but urged most of all for efficient teacher trainings to adjust the teachers to the programmes rather than the programmes to the teachers. This provoked some critics to think of the Beninese education sector as a laboratory of educational reform or a playground filled with foreign toys, tested on a trial-and-error base. The introduction of local languages as modes of instruction is on the agenda of the Ministry but if this step will eventually satisfy communist teacher trade unions’ claims for a “patriotic” education system remains to be seen. The battle is thus not only fought between donors but also between different political factions within the educational state apparatus itself.

The teacher training touches a third grand line of debate: the financial aspects of the reform. Local debates on the undermining effects of a deeply rooted and officially accepted “per diem culture” (cf. Jordan Smith 2003) on teacher trainings, and rumours about corrupt education officials and the mismanagement of USAID’s non-project assistance heavily influenced the image of the state at work in education.

State practices, i.e. practices by state actors, and the image of the state were often not in line with each other. The image of the aid-dependent state which could not provide enough schools for its number of pupils was for instance severely damaged when the Ministry used its foreign assistance to buy luxury cars in the first place. Joy about the President’s initiatives for free access to primary schools was hampered when the political ambitions in foresight of the parliamentary elections became obvious. The image of the Beninese state that was conceived by the World Bank education specialist was one of a weak mega-state with very little degree of self-information that drowned in its own activism. Not even the number of international and transnational players on its playground for educational reform was known with certainty, but efforts were made to make a turn for the better.

I started this article with the intention to depict local debates on primary education and the NSP as a window looking at mundane processes of state formation, thus adding a piece to the puzzle of the empirical study of state formation processes in West Africa as outlined by the research programme “States at Work”. I posed the question whether the primary education sector in Benin can be seen as a playground for educational reform or a battlefield of donor intervention and found evidence for both in my interviewee’s accounts. I close this article with the somehow self-evident, but seldom empirically grounded notion that state making – through educational policy making – is not a rational, harmonious and straight-forward act, but a slow and messy negotiation and adaptation process, technical and political at the same time and touching a variety of interests and constraints on a local, international and transnational scale.

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