

Curricula, Teachers' Training, Learners' Attitudes and Socio-economic Factors on Academic Performance in Cameroon

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Abstract

For some decades now, in Cameroon as in many African countries, a serious decline in educational standards is being observed. The blame is generally laid on television and ICTs, as parents complain that their children spend their time watching documentaries, films or other TV programmes. In recent times, this has been compounded with WhatsApp and android phones that even primary school pupils manipulate. But all of this is just part of the complex problem of children's education in Cameroon. There has been the multiplication of primary school teachers' training schools as well as higher teacher training colleges across the country, but paradoxically, there is an acute shortage of primary and secondary school teachers in almost all Cameroonian schools. The lone personnel of some primary schools at times is just the headmaster. Many primary and secondary schools across the country do not have any trained teacher at all. The curricula in use are quite problematic as they are unnecessary too demanding from the learner. From data gathered through questionnaires and interviews with some primary and secondary schools teachers (N=100) as well as teacher trainers (N=20) of both categories of teachers, this paper analyses the weaknesses of the curricula in use in the Francophone subsystem of education in Cameroon. It also looks at teachers' training/qualification, teaching approaches, learners' attitudes to learning and some socio-economic factors, which all combine to lead to poor academic performance. The findings show that the current curricula in primary and secondary schools are inadequate and too demanding from the learner. Many student teachers go to training school because of lack of job, most primary and secondary schools teachers are unqualified, many learners show little interest to their studies, and many socio-economic factors aggravate the situation.

Keywords: curricula, teacher training, learners' attitudes, factors, programmes, performance

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1. Introduction

In Cameroon, educational standard downfall can be observed at all levels. As this crisis which started long ago impacts the whole society, people have been wondering about its real causes. Up to secondary school level, there are many Cameroonian pupils who are unable to count, read properly, or write intelligible sentences. At university, the general complaint is that students do not read, and consequently are unable to produce adequate written works in English or French. This is quite understandable, as most learning comes from reading. Since knowledge is contained in books, one cannot expect an illiterate person to produce a miracle. In Cameroon, this pathetic situation has serious consequences at all strata of society. A poorly trained child at school will necessarily have a poor performance at the job site. Cameroonian schools have thus been producing millions of certificates and degree holders, but of very low standard. This paper looks at some of the causes of that problem in the francophone subsystem of education, particularly focusing on the weaknesses of the primary and secondary schools curricula, teachers' training/qualification, teaching approaches, learners' attitudes to education, and some socio-economic factors.

2. Literature review

From generation to generation, falling standards in education has always been a topic of great debates. Parents always expect their children to do more than them or to perform at least like them at school. Unfortunately, the societal realities vary with time. The types and quantity of distraction keep on changing. Each generation of children has their priorities and distractions which are not necessarily those of their parents. Besides these factors, the curricula and teachers' training / qualification can be some of the causes of the problem. Otara (2012) points out that in Africa, the engineering technical and vocational schools are still teaching 1960s and 1970s techniques and technologies. There is thus a complete mismatch between the knowledge and skills acquired by the graduates and those actually required by the new industries and self employment. As the old techniques continue to be taught without any link with the current realities, there is a growing number of unemployable youth and job losses because industries cannot find the qualified and skilled employees they need (Otara 2012: 152). Safotso (2020) notes that the colonial educational system that was made to train subaltern clerks in colonial administration in Africa was not re-structured after independence to suit the new context. Whenever new education policies have been attempted, they have generally been inadequate as the new political and educational

authorities are unable to depart from the colonial mentalities (p.98). Like Otara, Safotso proposes the abandonment of general education for technical one with up to date equipments/techniques based on local realities.

To Mthiyane *et al.* (2014), a school can decline due to a number of complex factors. In a study conducted in four secondary schools in Kwazulu-Natal (South Africa), they reported that the schools concerned had declined among others because of the quality of school leadership, the dedication and commitment of school teachers and learners, the socio-economic factors, the inadequate support from the Department of Education, and the interference of some teacher unions. As they comment, “decline is not a sudden even, but a long process concerned with failure to accomplish the organisation’s primary mission” (p.295). Duke (2008:49) notes that school decline is “the process of continuing failure to achieve the main goal of the school, which is learner achievement over time.” Summarising from Duke (2008), Duke & Hochbein (2008), Hochbein (2011) and Sahakyan (2014), Mthiyane *et al.* list the following factors as associated with school decline: school’s ability to accomplish its learners achievement goal is compromised over time; absence of a clear school vision and mission statement and specific teaching and learning priorities; lack of instructional leadership which emphasises quality teaching and learning; ineffective and inefficient leadership at all school levels; teachers who are unwilling or not committed to providing learners with a foundation for later life; poor curriculum alignment and focus; absence of discipline among school stakeholders, especially teachers and learners; failure of the teachers to hold learners to high expectations and budget reductions that may be associated with socio-economic conditions of the school; loss or reduction of stake holder support; migration of people from rural to urban area or even abroad to find jobs (p. 296).

In a survey aiming at knowing the learners’ view point on their academic failure, Najimi *et al.* (2013) mentioned that the most important factors affecting educational failure were curriculum, factors related to educator, learning environment, family and socio-economic factors. To Brenton (2012), the idea that students fail because of their own personal shortcomings is being superseded by that of school failure. As he points out, “the cause of students’ failure is now seen as deficient or inadequate provision of education by schools, and by extension, school systems. It is the failure of school to provide education which is appropriate to different needs that leads students to fail” (Brenton 2012: 3). As a solution, he proposes that school set guidelines to promote the use of direct and student-oriented instruction, i.e. instructions built around problems with clear, correct answers that can be learnt quickly. He also particularly insists on the use of student-oriented approach which is a strong preference of some western countries including Australia, Canada, the United States, Finland, Austria and Norway (p. 6). Most of the issues raised in this review can be observed in education in Cameroon as will be discussed in Section 4.

3. Methodology

The data analysed were collected through three questionnaires. The first one was administered to 50 primary and 50 secondary school teachers of the West Region of Cameroon. The second one was addressed to 10 teacher trainers of Higher Teacher Training Colleges of Bamenda and Maroua. The last questionnaire was distributed to teacher trainers of primary school teacher schools (N=10). They generally aimed to know the teachers’ training/qualification, the teaching approaches used, their assessment of the curricula and the learners’ attitudes to education. In total, 120 informants took part in the survey. The questionnaires were completed with some unstructured interviewed with 10 secondary school teachers, 10 primary ones, and three of their trainers. The interviews generally targeted the teachers’ general appraisal of the educational system in Cameroon, what they think can be the major causes of educational downfall, and what they can propose as solution.

4. Results

The falling standards of education in Cameroon can be dated back to about 20 years ago. By then, the curricula were designed with the help of educational experts; course books did not belong to individuals, but were the ministry’s properties. In all the subjects, in primary and secondary schools, textbooks were written by groups of renowned teachers/inspectors under the supervision of the ministry. Throughout the country, all the schools used the same textbooks per subject, and control of the system was quite easy. That glorious period is now unfortunately far behind. Many factors have contributed to educational decline and learners’ poor performance. They can mainly be put into five broad categories: (1) the curricula, (2) teaching approaches, (3) teacher’s training /qualification, (4) the learner’s attitude, (5) the socio-economic factors.

4.1. The curricula

From nursery to secondary school, all the teachers involved in the survey bitterly complained of the exaggerated number of subjects in the curricula. For example, in Francophone nursery schools, the curriculum which used to comprise five to seven subjects in the 1990s now has 23 subjects (see *Curriculum de l’Enseignement Maternel Francophone Camerounais* 2018: 6-7). In those days, it mainly consisted in socialising the child to better live

with other members of his society. It is why that programme was so relax and full of games, singing and dancing. Most teachers complained that with the exceedingly high number of subjects, they spend sleepless nights preparing lessons, and in class, they are so tired and even confuse some lessons. The same situation is observed in primary school. According to the new curriculum, *Curriculum de l'Enseignement Primaire Francophone Camerounais*, Niveau 1 (2018: 6-7), a *Cours Préparatoire* (Class II) child now has to study 30 subjects against eight in the past (*Horaires et Programmes* 1976:22). A first year nursery school now has 24 subjects against seven in the past. Given that in Cameroon many children nowadays go to school before the normal age of four, the worry is how they cope with this exaggerated number of subjects, which even confuse their teachers. Another major problem with the curricula in Cameroon is their content and their constant change, without giving time to teachers to assimilate them, and without their critical assessment by national and regional pedagogic inspectors for a better change. In the programme there are many subjects that the teacher has to teach without receiving any training on them. For example, **computer skills, English, national languages, or sports** that every nursery or primary school teacher should teach in their classes are subjects they have no skills in. Those subjects necessitate a serious in-service training for teachers to cope with them.

In secondary school, the situation is not different. From a few key/useful subjects, the learners are now burdened with so many items. For example, in *Sixième* (Form I) and *Troisième* (Form IV), the learner now has to study respectively 16 and 15 subjects against nine and 11 in the past (see *Programme de l'Enseignement Secondaire* 1982-83). The new subjects added include **Latin, national languages, national culture, computer skills, oral expression, civic and moral education**. So, the curriculum followed is quite dense and confusing, not giving the learner the opportunity to study any subject in depth. For instance, the importance of a dead language such as Latin in an already congested programme is quite questionable. Moreover, the national languages and cultures that every teacher teaches according to their own fantasy are not assessed at any official examination. 87 percent of primary school teachers involved in the study reported that divisional delegates and inspectors force them to teach the national language of the area where they are posted. Generally, those teachers have never learnt how to read the phonetic alphabet in which all Cameroonian languages are transcribed. Consequently, this confused curriculum leads to superficiality in all the subjects learnt in Cameroonian primary and secondary schools. The learner has no time to study in depth anything. The next section focuses on the teaching approach.

4.1.1. The teaching approach

The teaching approach in primary and secondary schools reflects the curriculum in use. For some time now, the song heard throughout the country is competency-based approach. Yet, of the 100 teachers (primary and secondary) who responded to the questionnaire, 86 (86 %) said that they do not understand/ master the approach. During the interviews, some of them reported that many pedagogic workshops and seminars have been organised on the issue. But since the pedagogic inspectors did not master the approach themselves, they yielded no concrete results. Some primary school teachers indicated that because of the multiplicity of subjects to teach and of the fact that pedagogic inspectors go to various schools to count their rate of lesson preparation, many teachers devote most of their time preparing some lessons even during teaching time. In fact, the competency-based approach is not new in education. It is a matter of taking time to learn and understand it. Citing Tuxworth (1994), Klein-Collins (2012) and Ford (2014), Nodine (2016:6) says that the initiation of CBE (Competency-Based Education) per se has been traced to 1968 in US higher education, when 10 colleges and universities were funded by the US Office of Education to develop training programs for elementary school teachers. So, although in Cameroon the approach looks so fashionable, **it has been in use for over 50 years**. Rather than insisting on an old approach that almost no teacher understands some modern approaches such as **task-based or activity-based, collaborative or gamification teaching and learning could be experimented**. In task-based or activity-based approach, learners are asked to take part in classroom interaction through interactive activities; in collaborative learning, every student is part of the success of the group as they help each other to reach the common desired goal. Crossover learning consists in using both formal and informal teaching and learning environment. This approach is very effective with elementary levels. The teacher's training / qualification is another major problem as examined in the following section.

4.2. Teacher's training / qualification

In Cameroon, primary school teachers are trained in primary school teacher's training schools. Those of secondary schools receive their training in higher teacher training colleges. But besides trained teachers, there are many others who have never received any pedagogy. The training per se in those schools is not a problem. But the entrance into them is a very serious cause of concern. For many years, the media have been decrying the way through which many candidates get into various national training schools in general, and teacher training schools in particular. Many candidates who succeed in the common entrance into teacher training schools are not the deserving ones. Most of them get into those schools either through corruption, national balance or recommendations. Those who have someone well placed in higher administration at times are admitted into them

even without writing the common entrance. Because of the reduction of the number of places in higher teacher training colleges these years (five students in some classes against more than 150 in the past), the price of bribery to enter those schools has reached alarming proportions. During their training, being absolutely sure that they will graduate, some student-teachers do not make any effort to learn. Consequently, they leave the training school almost empty-headed, and this is felt in their output in various schools where they are posted. During the interview, 82 % of lecturers teaching in higher teacher training colleges and teacher trainers of primary school training schools complained that administrative marks (marks granted to lazy students by school administration to help them pass) has become common practice in teacher training schools. It is what leads to the situation whereby every student who enters those schools graduates at all cost, no matter their performance. Besides these poorly trained teachers, in primary and secondary schools, there are many others who have received no training at all.

In Cameroon, there is presently no public primary/secondary school without part-time, parents' and teachers' association, or contract teachers. They even form the bulk of Cameroonian teachers. From the questionnaire, 96 % of respondents reported that many of their colleagues were untrained teachers. In primary schools, most of them are generally *BEPC* (GCE Ordinary Level) or *Baccalauréat* (GCE Advanced Level) certificates holders. In some schools, all the teaching staff is of this category, and at times their number is not sufficient to cover all the classes. In rural secondary schools, the ministry generally sends two to three trained teachers, and the remaining ones are recruited by the PTA (Parents' and Teachers' Association) on the spot. Those recruited are generally BA holders without any pedagogic training. In urban schools, though the situation is a bit different, the number of part-time teachers in some schools is alarming. For example, in *Lycée Leclerc*, one of the renowned secondary schools in Cameroon, reports indicate that there are over 120 part-time teachers among whom many postgraduate students. Across the country, there are even some striking cases where secondary school learners spend whole academic years without teachers in some subjects. In primary schools some pupils spend whole terms without teachers. Globally, teachers' training/qualification and students-teacher ratio has reached alarming proportions in Cameroon. The section below looks at the learners' attitudes toward education.

4.3. Learners' attitudes to studies

More and more, Cameroonian learners show little interest to their education. During the interviews, 52 % of informants complained of the indifferent attitudes of their learners to their studies. They partly attributed it to the high rate of unemployed school leavers. They explained that some learners say that certificates and degrees did not help their elder brothers and sisters. Those who really devote all their time to their studies are few. In secondary school, most participants reported that, in the absence of captivating /relax curricula and devoted teachers, most students spend their time on the telephone, web sites and networks, WhatsApp, Facebook, or watching films. This attitude can also be observed at university level as it is becoming rare to find learners who enjoy reading and really devote all their time to studies. Some of them see it as a burden. Yet, a good curriculum has to combine studies, games and leisure to better attract the interest of learners. Unfortunately, because of poor curriculum, lack of adequate training, most primary and secondary school teachers are confused with their learners' behaviour.

Learners' age is also becoming a problem. The normal school age as studied by psychologists and pedagogues is four years to enter nursery school, and six years for primary school. By that age, it is assumed that the child has had enough time to socialise and familiarise with his environment. Only the geniuses can be an exception to that rule. Unfortunately, in Cameroon, with the anarchical multiplicity of private nursery and primary schools across the country, and whose aim is generally to grab as much money as possible, it has become fashionable **to send one's child to school before the normal school age**, this totally against the ministerial instructions. Many nursery schools are full of children of two year's old. Primary schools are inundated with pupils aged four or five. It is not rare to see children of nine or even eight years already in secondary school. The socio-economic situation of the country also counts among the factors that contribute to learners' poor performance as discussed below.

4.4. Socio-economic factors

Cameroon has been experiencing political and economic crises for the past 30 years. This has seriously impacted the educational system of the country. Teaching which used to be a prestigious and elitist profession practised only by duty-conscious professionals has become the refuge of jobless people. It is where most unemployed young Cameroonians first try their chance after leaving school while hoping to get something better. School libraries which used to be supplied by the government are now empty. Even basic teaching materials such as chalk, teacher's textbook / logbook, adequate blackboards, etc. have become a serious problem in many schools. In some primary schools, pupils sit on the floor to attend classes while in secondary schools at times they stand or jam five or six per bench. In addition to these macro factors, in rural areas, many children go to school

without textbooks and exercise books because of the extreme poverty of their parents. At home, most pupils have no follow up as their parents are generally out to fight for means to survive. Since across the country very few schools have a canteen, many children spend the whole day at school without eating anything. Thus, rather than concentrate on what is being taught they think of how to get something to eat.

5. Conclusion

To conclude, it can be said the poor performance of learners in Cameroon results from many factors: poor teachers' training / qualification, inadequate curricula and teaching approaches, learners' negative attitudes to education, and socio-economic factors. But all of these constitute just the tip of the iceberg. The Cameroonian educational system (both the francophone and Anglophone subsystems) has reached a serious stage of decadence and necessitates profound adjustments. The government needs to organise nationwide symposia, colloquia and workshops on the issue to diagnose all the problems for adequate solutions. This entails putting all the stakeholders together and listening to their proposals for prompt implementation. The 21st century educational goals have seriously evolved, and any serious educational system should be readjusted to produce useful/competent citizens.

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