

Exploring Educational Quality through Classroom Practices: A Study in Selected Primary School Classes in Burkina Faso¹

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Abstract

The paper reports on an exploratory study on the quality of education which attempts to identify and analyse classroom practices in a few Grade 5 (CM1) classes in Burkina Faso primary schools. The study is grounded on a model of the teaching-learning encounter and a framework for summarising the characteristics of a “good” teacher and an ideal classroom that underline the central place of classroom processes in a definition of quality education. The findings from the questionnaires and interviews summarize the views expressed by the various key actors of the educational system about the definition of quality education, some indicators that can be used to measure it, what one can expect to observe in an ideal classroom and the characteristics of a good teacher. The classroom observations revealed many of these “good” features of classroom practices. Some of the most important ones relate to a lively anxiety-free atmosphere and warm teacher-learner relations, and the special attention and initiative given to the pupils. These results as well as the feedback from the participants show that despite a certain number of methodological issues and practical difficulties raised by this type of research, it can be further refined and used for monitoring quality and designing tools for school-based teacher development schemes.

Introduction

For the past decade Burkina Faso has deployed gigantic efforts to reach the Millennium Development Goals, particularly those relating to the provision of quality education for all. The country has gone a long way since independence in 1960, when its primary school gross enrolment rate (GER) was a mere 6%, to the current 66.6% (MEBA 2007a, b). Most education indicators remain however far below those of other developing countries, for instance the literacy rate was still 28.7% according to the latest population census (INSD 2006).

This prompted the government to launch a comprehensive ten year education

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development plan (*Plan Décennal de Développement de l'Éducation de Base PDDEB 2001-2010*.) with the aim of improving the access, the quality, and management of the educational system. PDDEB mobilises substantial resources from the State budget (over 100 billion CFA Francs, 10.5 % of the total national budget in 2008) and it receives the financial and technical support of many international donors, local stakeholders and various partners of the civil society.

The impact of the plan can now be felt on the field. Between 2001 and 2007 the GER has significantly improved, gender and regional disparities have been reduced thanks to large scale construction of schools and a massive recruitment of teachers. PDDEB also provides for mechanisms and incentives to improve quality: free textbooks, meals, latrines, accommodation for teachers, in-service teacher training and other school-based improvement projects. These measures have resulted in a sharp decrease of repetition rates (from 30.3% to 23.8%, that is - 6.5 points between 2001 and 2007 in Grades 5 and 6), a slight reduction of drop-out rates, and an increase of the promotion and completion rates (respectively +3.1 and +10 percentage points in Grade 5).

In an attempt to raise the motivation of teachers and pupils, the government celebrates every year in each of the 13 provinces “*Excellence Days*” (*Journées d'Excellence*) to distinguish and reward the best schools, pupils and teachers. The criteria for such selections are however rather crude and focus on the results of the primary school leaving certificate (*CEP*) exam.

There is still a lot to be done to maintain and improve the internal and external efficiency of the educational system. The second phase of PDDEB will lay a special emphasis on improving the quality and relevance of basic education through a revision of the curriculum, more efficient pre-service and in-service teacher training, free distribution of teaching materials, and better teaching and learning conditions (MEBA 2007d).

All these efforts will be channelled through the general educational reform launched in 2007 whose main features are outlined in the new education orientation law (Burkina Faso, 2007). One of the major innovations introduced is the extension of the concept of basic education to cover the children population aged from 6 – 16 (previously 6-12). This entails that the first cycle of secondary schools (now called post-primary cycle) will be attached to the ministry of basic education and literacy. The reform also asserts that basic education is free and compulsory for all children living in the country without distinction of race, gender, creed or even nationality. The latter aspect of the reform will be implemented progressively; for the 2007-2008 school year, 45 administrative departments benefitted from free basic education for all on an experimental basis.

Justification of the Study

Despite all these advances and good intentions many analysts, particularly trade unions, still fear that the “massification” of the educational system boosted by PDDEB could worsen what they perceive as a decline of the quality of education in the country.

Such judgements are however often based on subjective and simplistic criteria. Relatively few formal evaluations using objective measures have been carried out on the quality of education in Burkina Faso. The only nation-wide studies were the sector analysis conducted by the Ministry of basic education and literacy (MEBA) in collaboration with the World Bank in the early 90's, The PASEC² survey of the late 90's which is currently being repeated and the school achievement study (*Acquis scolaires*) conducted by the Directorate of Studies and Planning of MEBA in collaboration with various donors, principally Canada.

The empirical evidence available so far on the quality of education has focused on outcomes (scores and percentages of passes at the CEP exam³). Very little has been done to take an objective picture of what goes on in the classroom. The *Acquis scolaires* study has carried out multiple regression analyses of a series of factors including teacher characteristics, but fell short of describing classroom process variables. The MEBA/World Bank studies included systematic classroom observations and highlighted important aspects of classroom processes, but its findings are now dated and only the their quantitative aspects were frequently quoted and exploited.

The absence of explicit descriptions of classroom practices often leads to definitions of good teachers and good practices based only on product variables (tests scores, results of national exams). Yet, most of the innovations envisaged by the up-coming curricular reform will involve major changes in teacher's and learners' classroom behaviours, and success will depend on their abilities and willingness to improve their practices. The new curricula will take into account the learner's first language as medium and subject of instruction alongside French, the official language; new contents will be introduced to address current concerns about "emergent" themes such as poverty alleviation, gender equity, human rights, preservation of the environment, the fight against HIV-AIDS and other modern plagues. Teaching methods will also have to incorporate more efficient approaches such as the competency-based curricular approach (APC) recommended by CONFEMEN⁴. APC is an approach grounded in socio-constructivism that aims among other things at:

- shifting from a teacher-centered and content-focused teaching to a more student-centred pedagogy;
- promoting learning contents and methods that have meaning for the pupil;
- integrating the knowledge and skills acquired in the various subjects and relating them to problem solving and pre-professionalisation.

² PASEC (Programme d'Analyse des Systèmes d'Education de la CONFEMEN) is a programme which regularly collects data of pupils' achievement in French and Math to monitor the quality of education in francophone African countries.

³ The results of the CEP have fluctuated throughout the years, throwing doubts on the validity and reliability of this exam as an indicator of the quality of education. Success rates seem to be artefacts of the type of test administered and it is suspected that some teachers and local authorities may have devised ways of fiddling with the results.

⁴ Conference of education ministers of francophone countries.

The issues raised above underscore the need for a study that takes an objective picture of classroom processes (implemented syllabus, pedagogic treatment, teacher's and learners' behaviours, classroom atmosphere, etc.) to provide some insights for classroom improvement through action research to give teachers opportunities for learning from their outstanding peers⁵.

It is hoped that the present study will contribute to the implementation of the new in-service teacher training scheme of the ministry (MEBA 2003), by pointing out ways in which good classroom practices can be used to create a more positive atmosphere of proximity pedagogic supervision.

Objectives of the Study

The study attempts to identify and describe classroom practices in a few CM1 (Grade 5) classrooms. Its general objective is to contribute to improving the quality of education in Burkina Faso. It has the following specific objectives:

- to explore the quality of education by analysing classroom practices
- to pave the way for classroom action research, school-based and GAP⁶-based collaborative in-service teacher development as a useful supplement to the current inspection/supervision system.
- to open the way to a fruitful collaboration between the university teacher-researchers and basic education practitioners;
- to provide the ministry of basic education and literacy with more refined criteria for selecting and encouraging good practices, and with useful input for decision making;
- to provide useful insights for the up-coming reform.

The Issue of Identifying and Analysing Good Classroom Practices

There is a need to clarify what is meant by “quality of education” in the Burkinabe context. Such a definition will have to go beyond input and outcome variables to include also process variables that are at the heart of the teaching-learning encounter. We can mention among other aspects that must be taken into account: teacher-learner interaction, implementation of pedagogic approaches, particularly the way in which the teacher adapts his methods to his class size and learners' characteristics and how he creates a lively and anxiety-free learning atmosphere.

The topic of the study raises, however, a certain number of thorny theoretical issues. It is not easy to define the place and role of classroom practices within an overall vision of

⁵ This need was clearly expressed in the speeches delivered by the representatives of the ministry of basic education and the university at the launching workshop of the present study.

⁶ A GAP (Groupe d'Animation Pédagogique) gathers teachers of a few neighbouring schools for collaborative in-service training activities.

the quality of education, to agree on the key characteristics of “good” teachers, and decide on the right methodological approach to adopt for a useful exploratory case study.

Classroom practices and the quality of education

Defining the quality of education is understandably a daunting task to which the present study attempts to bring its modest contribution. Without rejecting the many definitions available in the literature, we shall go by a practical one that sees quality as “fit for the purpose”⁷. The “purpose” can be determined by listening to the views of the various stakeholders of the educational system.

The complexity of how to improve educational quality is evidenced by recent works such as those reviewed by the Association for the Development of Education in Africa (ADEA 2004, 2006), UNESCO (2005), and the research scheme funded by USAID on Improving Educational Quality (IEQ). The summary of the main findings and recommendations of the ADEA 2006 biennale on education, notes that “despite a remarkable progress in school enrolments, literacy rates, and political commitment, there remain important challenges to reach quality education and effective schools in Africa:

- generally low learning levels in primary education and declining reading results,
- overcrowded classrooms,
- perfunctory oversight of teaching,
- inadequate supply of teachers and textbooks,
- ineffective language of instruction policies and practices,
- continued use of ineffective teaching methods despite considerable investment in teacher development programs.”

The biennale report concludes that “quality improvement depends on teachers and what happens in the classroom [.....]. However, existing pre- and in-service teacher training models do not show an influence on teaching practices and student learning.”

Research on education quality in Sub-Saharan Africa must therefore focus not only on inputs and outcomes but also on classroom processes to try to propose alternative approaches for more effective in-service teacher development.

The theoretical framework within which we view the place of classroom practices is a model of the teaching-learning encounter adapted by Kouraogo (1987 and 2005) from Dunkin and Biddle (1974) and Stern (1983). See Appendix I. The model shares many features with the UNESCO (2005) model. There are however slight differences. We have put for instance *teaching time and class size with contextual variables while teaching methods and learning* are considered as process variables. The importance of this model lies in the fact that it posits relationships and causal links between bundles of variables. For instance, class size and the availability of books affect learning outcomes but this

⁷ Cf. observations made by the Rector of United Nations University during the presentation of the 2007 AA dialogue research projects in Tokyo.

effect is somehow mediated by learners' and teachers' characteristics and by process variables such as how books are used, the educational treatment applied, etc. The main claim rejoins ADEA's conclusion quoted above: process variables should be the main focus as they affect more directly the results.

The “good” teacher

The second major theoretical issue relates to the definition of “good,” “effective” or “outstanding” teachers. Research in this area is a rather slippery ground fraught with subjectivity and error-prone methodology (Kyriacou & Newson 1982; Bolak 1983; Stenhouse 1984; Awomolo 1985; Awuwoloye 1985). We can assume that good outcomes are a proof of the outstanding qualities of the teacher⁸ but they may be also due to the characteristics of the learners and/or the positive the influence of the other teachers and the general school atmosphere.

Despite these difficulties, this study is premised on the fact that those in charge of evaluating, monitoring and promoting good pedagogic practices will know good teaching when they see it. Their judgements can be based on official guidelines and their own conceptions of what is more conducive to the desired outcomes. Although there are more objective ways of selecting the best teachers, many of these criteria have often lead to disappointing or inconclusive results in past studies because of the complex nature of teaching and learning.

We have also used a framework devised by Kouraogo (1987) to organise the key characteristics of “good” teachers we have gathered through the literature review, the questionnaires and interviews under three inter-related poles: The *Control* exerted by the teacher, the amount of *initiative* given to the learner and the quality of the *interpersonal relationships* within the teaching learning encounter.

Research Questions

The study addresses the following questions among others:

- What criteria and indicators are used by the various actors of the educational system to refer to quality education?
- How can we define good classroom practices in the Burkinabe context?
- What features of classroom processes (attitudes and behaviours of teachers and learners) can we observe in the Grade 5 classes identified as “good” or “outstanding”?
- What perspective can this exploratory study open for further action research?

⁸ It is actually the assumption behind the *Excellence Days* mentioned above. For instance, Teachers are rewarded for high percentage passes achieved by their pupils at the CEP exam. There is even a distinction for the teacher of the pupil who gets the best mark in his/her region, regardless of the results of the rest of the class. The teacher could therefore be rewarded for the high IQ of one particular pupil.

Methodological Aspects

Type of study

The *Acquis Scolaires* study currently carried out by the Ministry of basic education has adopted the “effective school approach” that “relies on quantitative and analytic techniques” to determine the relative effects of different inputs on achievements. The present study has opted for a “school improvement approach” which uses more ethnographic instruments to study natural classroom level processes and their interactions and effects on achievements (see Jansen 1995). The other variables that impact on quality such as context variables (class size, availability of books, relationship between the school and the community, etc.), presage variables⁹ (learners’ individual characteristics) and product variables (test results) were not the main focus of the study. They were however documented through questionnaires and interviews because they can help to understand classroom processes.

The research is essentially qualitative, but it also used quantitative data to supplement the qualitative ones. Because of its exploratory nature, no inferential statistics claims are made. Although we have observed six (6) teachers, the work remains on the whole a case study with no attempt to generalise the findings over the 28,000 other teachers. (See the discussion of the difference between a study of samples and a study of cases by Stenhouse 1980)

Population and sampling

The target population is the CM1 (Grade 5) classrooms of schools identified by the local pedagogic supervisors as “outstanding” not only on the basis of their high scores at the national exam, but more importantly because of the personal qualities of their teachers (Table 1). The sampling was therefore purposeful and to some extent stratified as we tried to include urban, semi-urban and rural schools, male and female teachers, classical schools using French exclusively, and a bilingual school where *Moore*, a local language is used alongside French.

Table 1. Schools Visited

No	PROVINCE	INSPECTORATE (CEB)	SCHOOL	CLASS SIZE Total / Girls	TYPE OF SCHOOL	TEACHER
1	Oubritenga	Ziniaré 1	Soulgo	31/11 G	Classical	Male
2	Oubritenga	Ziniaré 1	Ziniaré B	82/35 G	Classical	Male
3	Oubritenga	Loumbila	Bangrin	27/09 G	Bilingual	Female
4	Kadiogo	Ouagadougou 1	Paspanga C	19/12 G	Classical	Female
5	Kadiogo	Ouagadougou 1	Nemnin III	62/38 G	Classical	Female
6	Bazèga	Saponé	Damkièta	72/18 G	Classical	Male

⁹ These terms are those used in the teaching-learning model in Appendix I.

CM1 (Grade 5) classes are more likely to reveal interesting pedagogic practices because it is the highest level of primary school where “real teaching ends”, Grade 6 (CM2) being unofficially devoted to mechanical question-answer drills to help pupils cram for the CEP and the selective secondary school entrance examinations. Many CM2 teachers’ hidden aim seems to be obtaining a high CEP pass rate to be rewarded during *Excellence Days*. Although the unorthodox methods used in these classes may deserve a special study, we have decided to concentrate on the 5th grade that is relatively unaffected by the backwash effects and pressures of exam preparations.

Due to time limitation the classroom observations were limited to the three fundamental subjects: Maths (geometry), Science, and Language (written and oral expression).

The questionnaires were distributed to all the inspectors and pedagogic advisers of the selected teachers and to central directors of MEBA. In addition, the head inspector of each inspectorate (CEB) in the sample was interviewed.

Data collection instruments and procedures

The data were gathered using the following instruments:

- Classroom observation grids;
- Video recordings of maths, science and language lessons;
- Documentary analysis of lesson plans, supervision reports, etc.;
- Questionnaires for central directors of MEBA, pedagogic supervisors, head-teachers and teachers;
- Interview protocols for head inspectors (CCEB), teachers, parents and pupils.

The questionnaire addressed to the inspectors was distributed at their annual conference held at Fada N’Gourma in August 2007. For the school classroom observations, the teachers were informed through the hierarchical channels and agreed to be observed. Then the team paid a first visit to the school to meet all the teachers to explain the objectives of the study and observe informally a lesson to get the teacher and pupils used to the presence of the observers and the camera. The first visit also allowed the team to decide with the teacher the lessons to be observed at the following visits. This required sometimes slight modifications of the timetable, but on the whole the lessons were those initially planned by the teacher. From the second visit onwards the observation team included a member of the conception team, a technician with a Camcorder, one inspector or pedagogic advisor trained to take notes using the observation grids, keeping in mind the philosophy underlying the study. The observation routine included a pre-observation interview during which the teacher explained what he/she was going to teach, his/her expectations and what the team should pay particular attention to; this was followed by note-taking and filming during the lesson. At the end of the lesson a post-observation interview was held to hear the teacher evaluate his/her own lesson and answer other questions the team wanted to ask about the lesson, the pupils or the school.

During their stay in each school the team also carried out interviews with three pupils (bright, average and weak) and three members of the parents' association, including a mother.

Data analysis

The qualitative data from the classroom observations, questionnaires and interviews were analysed using qualitative grids. Basic statistical analyses were carried out with the SPSS software on the quantitative data. Given the exploratory nature of the research project, no specific hypotheses to be confirmed or rejected were set in advance. Instead we have tried to record the main trends in the findings that could help to stage further studies on more formal bases.

At the end of each visit the research team met to draw the main lessons from the observations and plan the next visit.

Peer and participant reviews

One of the ways suggested by the American sociologist Egon Guba (1981) to ensure the trustworthiness of naturalistic research is to hold consultation sessions with peer researchers and even the subjects who participated in the study (in the present case the teachers who were observed). The research proposal was discussed on various occasions within the AA-Dialogue project and at the launching ceremony attended by some twenty (20) participants from the Ministry of Basic Education and Literacy, university professors, JICA and an NGO working in the education sector. At the end of the field work and before writing up the report, the team held a full day feedback workshop with all the teachers whose classes were observed, to check some of the team's impressions and probe further into various aspects of the study.

Results

Despite the limited sample of classes observed and the rather exploratory nature of the instruments and procedures used to gather the data, we feel confident that the study was worthwhile and that we have reached some interesting results that answer to some extent the research questions. The main findings relate to the viewpoints expressed by the stakeholders of the educational system about the quality of education and good teachers, a summary of our main findings from the classroom observations, and the lessons learnt from the research process, and the prospects for further studies.

The study has collected a rich amount of data some of which will not appear prominently in the present paper, for instance some quantitative results from our SPSS analysis, but they are described in the full research report.

Summary of the findings from the literature review and the questionnaires

After analysing the answers of the questionnaires and interviews we have compiled

and summarised the views of the central directors, the pedagogic supervisors (inspectors and pedagogic advisors), the head-teachers and teachers about the quality of education and what one can expect to find in an ideal classroom.

Definition of the quality of education by inspectors, pedagogic advisors and teachers

A good educational system must

- implement curricular contents and methods taking into account the reality on the field;
- have high internal efficiency (low drop-out and repetition rates, high retention and completion rates);
- develop the desirable knowledge, skills, attitudes and behaviours;
- allow learners to reinvest in practical life the knowledge and skills acquired at school;
- promote learner autonomy and initiative;
- reach the main external efficiency goals (making good hardworking well-integrated citizens);
- contribute to the development of the country by fighting against illiteracy, ignorance, disparities, and poverty;
- promote positive values;
- open pupils' minds to other cultures.

Some indicators that could be used to assess educational quality

- Availability of adequate infrastructure;
- School enrolment rates;
- Pass rates at national exams and competitive tests;
- Promotion and completion rates;
- Dropout and repetition rates;
- Literacy rates;
- Respect of gender and regional equity;
- Professional and social insertion of graduates;
- Teachers' qualifications.

What one can expect to observe in an ideal classroom

- Pupils actively participating in a variety of tasks (answering, asking questions, manipulating, doing exercises);
- Well-behaved children who organize themselves to work in the absence of their teacher;
- Punctual and assiduous pupils;
- Pupils expressing themselves freely and fluently;
- Neatly presented copy books;
- Solidarity and mutual help;
- Clean pupils who maintain a clean and healthy environment;
- Polite pupils who greet their teacher and other people, who say thanks and respect the national flag.

Characteristics of the “good” teacher

The answers about the characteristics of a “good” teacher were quite rich. We have lumped together some of the ideas and we have harmonised and improved the wordings by using terms and sentences from the literature on good/effective teachers.

We acknowledge the weakness of such lists, but feel that they can be considered as raw materials that can be refined through further studies and discussions among specialists and practitioners. As we have explained earlier in the methodology section, we have grouped the characteristics under three headings. The term *Control* is not restricted to how the teacher controls his/her class it refers more broadly to the way the teacher’s competence, his knowledge and his skills and attitudes allow him to play his leading and guiding role in the teaching-learning encounter. *Initiative* refers to what the teacher does to promote learners’ initiatives and autonomy. The third pole concerns the quality of the *interpersonal relationships* within and outside the classroom which can influence positively or negatively the learner’s attitudes and performance.

Control

The “good” or “effective” teacher

- loves teaching and what he/she is doing with the pupils;
- possesses a deep knowledge of the subjects he/she teaches and makes judicious use of teaching materials / aids;
- has a passion for the subject and is able to explain complicated and confusing information in a way that makes it understandable for the pupils;
- knows the syllabus and the textbook but is not book-bound, and has a critical and selective approach to syllabus and textbook;
- knows and abides by the deontology and the rules of the profession;
- maintains and improves his knowledge and his professional competence through active involvement in teacher development activities;
- is the natural commanding influence in the classroom and maintains good order with the minimum fuss;
- his/her pupils know exactly where they stand with the teacher and accept the situation;
- creates a sense of purpose in which pupils know what is expected of them by making the objectives obvious to them;
- organizes carefully the tasks and activities that the learners are to be engaged in and directs the learners so that they know exactly what they need to do and how they should do it;
- offers a wide variety of learning experiences;
- monitors and checks what’s going on in the classroom and decides when and how to give feedback;
- provides a sensitive level of feedback.

Initiative

The “good” or “effective” teacher

- encourages the students to take risks and always has a positive attitude;
- tries many different methods of teaching that encourage students and create in them a sense of accomplishment;
- listens to his pupils carefully;
- involves the pupils as themselves and gets them to participate, and succeed to the best of their abilities;
- encourages students to communicate with each other;
- uses a higher proportion of free communication exercises than controlled drills;
- knows how to bring pupils to integrate the knowledge and skills.

Inter-personal Relationships

The “good” or “effective” teacher

- has a genuine love for, and interest in children;
- creates a warm atmosphere and trusting relationships;
- has pleasant manners with children, and addresses the class as though speaking to each person rather than to everyone in general;
- smiles and uses good eye-contact;
- does nothing to take away the pupil’s self-respect.
- collaborates well with his/her colleagues;
- maintains good working relations with parents and other stakeholders;

Summary of the findings from the classroom observations

Because the team had set out to observe naturalistic phenomena, teachers in their daily practices in ordinary classrooms, we visited the classes with open minds expecting to see “outstanding” lessons but also routine techniques and gimmicks and even flops, questionable attempts and failures. We went however with the aim of detecting what would go right in the lessons, an approach that is quite the opposite of the classical inspection visits during which the main concern is to pin down what goes wrong for corrective measures and eventually sanctions.

There are many lessons to be drawn from the analysis of the video recordings and the filled observations grids (see example in Appendix II). On the whole, our impressions of the lessons observed are quite positive. In each of the classes we were able to identify many instances of good practice.

In terms of physical environment, the classes had the typical sizes of Burkinabè schools, even though Damkieta (72 pupils) and Ziniare B (82) were rather overcrowded while Paspanga C (19) was intriguingly small for an urban school. The classes were generally clean but only two of them were well decorated. One urban school was very old with poorly ventilated classrooms. In four of the classrooms visited there was enough space to arrange the seats in such a way that half of the class faced the other and the

teacher could move freely and exploit two large blackboards.

There appeared to be a convivial atmosphere among the teaching staff. The parents and pupils said that the school and teachers met their expectations. In one case however the teachers were disappointed with the lack of involvement of the parents' association. In that particular school we did witness a fairly telling illustration of such negative attitude, a far cry from cases in other schools where several parents stopped by to enquire about their children's behaviours. This positive attitude was particularly true of the bilingual school one of whose priorities is to achieve a perfect integration with the surrounding community.

The teachers' ages ranged from mid-thirties to late forties and they all had at least six years of teaching experience. Their answers to an attitude questionnaire on learner-centredness and teacher-pupil relationships revealed that they favour a democratic style of teaching and trusting and caring interpersonal relationships. They were all warm and humble. Most of them were surprised to have been chosen by their inspectors as model teachers. During the post-observation interviews they were self-critical and often asked the inspector member of the observation team to tell them what they did wrong and how to improve their teaching.

The teaching styles and pace of the lessons varied sometimes widely among the teachers but the general impression was good. All the teachers shared many of the characteristics of a good teacher listed above. The lessons did not smack of rehearsed drills and the pupils were clearly at ease with their teachers. In several cases we have seen pupils pointing out slips made by the teacher and this was accepted heartily by the latter. The teachers have shown their abilities cater for individual needs even in crowded conditions by moving around the class and making every pupil participate. They knew their pupils very well and used this knowledge to make decisions on seating arrangements and distribution of questions and tasks, even though this may be the result of the rather controversial practice of each teacher moving from one grade to the next with his/her pupils. The executions of the lesson plans were flawless. In most cases the pupils were well organised in work groups and showed that they could take initiatives and work independently even in the absence of the teacher, for instance when the latter was busy with us during the pre- and post-observation interviews.

We found it relevant to summarise below some specific observations concerning the most "outstanding" teacher of the group, relating them to the three poles of control, initiative and interpersonal relationships.

Control

- He shows a perfect mastery of the topics he is teaching and hardly consults his notes;
- He is a natural commanding figure and controls everything that occurs in the classroom by moving around, using eye contact and controlling pupils' individual work; pupils know where they stand and we have not witnessed any discipline problem;
- He sets clear instructions and keeps explaining the aim of each task; he even negotiates any changes of plan or strategy with the pupils (for instance how they were going to compensate for the disruptions caused by the research team's visit);
- He obviously loves his job and his pupils and teaches with passion; He is careful, neat and has a beautiful handwriting; the team was impressed by the pains he took to protect the pupils' textbooks with nice craft paper covers.

Initiative

- Pupils showed clear signs that they are used to taking initiatives for some aspects of the courses (for instance what they had to do after class to assist the weaker members of their work groups);
- The teacher listened and looks genuinely interested in pupils' contribution even when they are not accurate;
- He encourages them to take risks and express themselves freely;
- He allows time for self-correction and peer correction. Correction by the teacher seems the last resort.

Interpersonal relationships

- He knows every student very well (he taught them the previous year) and relates to each of them with respect and encouragement;
- He knows how to preserve the pupil's ego and he encourages the weaker or absent-minded pupils;
- He helps each pupil to reveal his/her potential (e.g. the only repeater in the class was once asked to explain to the rest of the class how they solved a particular problem last year);
- Nothing seemed to ruffle him; he always smiles, uses jokes and mimes and never loses his temper;
- The parents interviewed confirmed that he is a hardworking and very sociable person who maintains excellent relations with the community.

Findings related to the research approach and perspectives for further studies

One important outcome of this exploratory study is what it reveals about the strengths and weaknesses of the approach adopted and the lessons we can draw for improvements of further studies. In this respect we can make the following observations;

We have had to modify several aspects of the initial proposal to try to reach better results, for instance the decision to select the teachers with the help of their closest pedagogic advisers was fully justified. However, for future such studies we could use additional criteria such as recommendations from peers and former pupils. We could also try to relate the choice of the teachers to their pupils' performances by testing the pupils at the beginning and at the end of the year to try to measure the actual effects the teacher's

intervention.

The study raised a lot of interest among the education authorities, the pedagogic advisers, the teachers and the research community. The participating teachers reacted positively and found the study quite relevant and promising. They all declared that they are willing to participate in eventual further studies. The results of the study must be widely disseminated and discussed to capitalise these positive feelings and build an ambitious action research project.

The next step could take two possible orientations. The first consists of gathering more instances of good practices to compile video cassettes that will serve as tools for proximity supervision and reflection within the pedagogic animation groups (PAG). The second orientation would be to refine the methodology and the tools, so as to twin the study with the other ongoing quantitative studies of MEBA (*Acquis Scolaires*, PASEC, competitive tests for *Excellency Days*). The specific contribution of the study would be to provide the ministry with supplementary qualitative indicators for monitoring the progress achieved by PDDEB and the effects of the implementation of the educational reform. The study could also be adapted for use in secondary education.

Conclusion

Despite some of the limitations acknowledged above we can conclude that the results reached are fairly substantial. We have managed with rather limited resources and under difficult conditions to interview tens of actors of the Burkinabè educational system, administer and analyse several questionnaires, and more importantly we have observed classes to see how teachers and learners recommended by proximity pedagogic supervisors interact and negotiate to try to reach positive outcomes in the teaching-learning encounter.

The tentative and sometimes vague formulations of the findings can be compensated by the explicit presentation of the approach and the methodological measures we have deployed to implement the project. We therefore feel that this paper can inspire similar studies and above all, incite reflection and debates around the issues of identifying and describing quality education and good classroom practices. It can also encourage contributions of outside observers (university researchers) to reflexive teacher development and in-service training schemes on the field.

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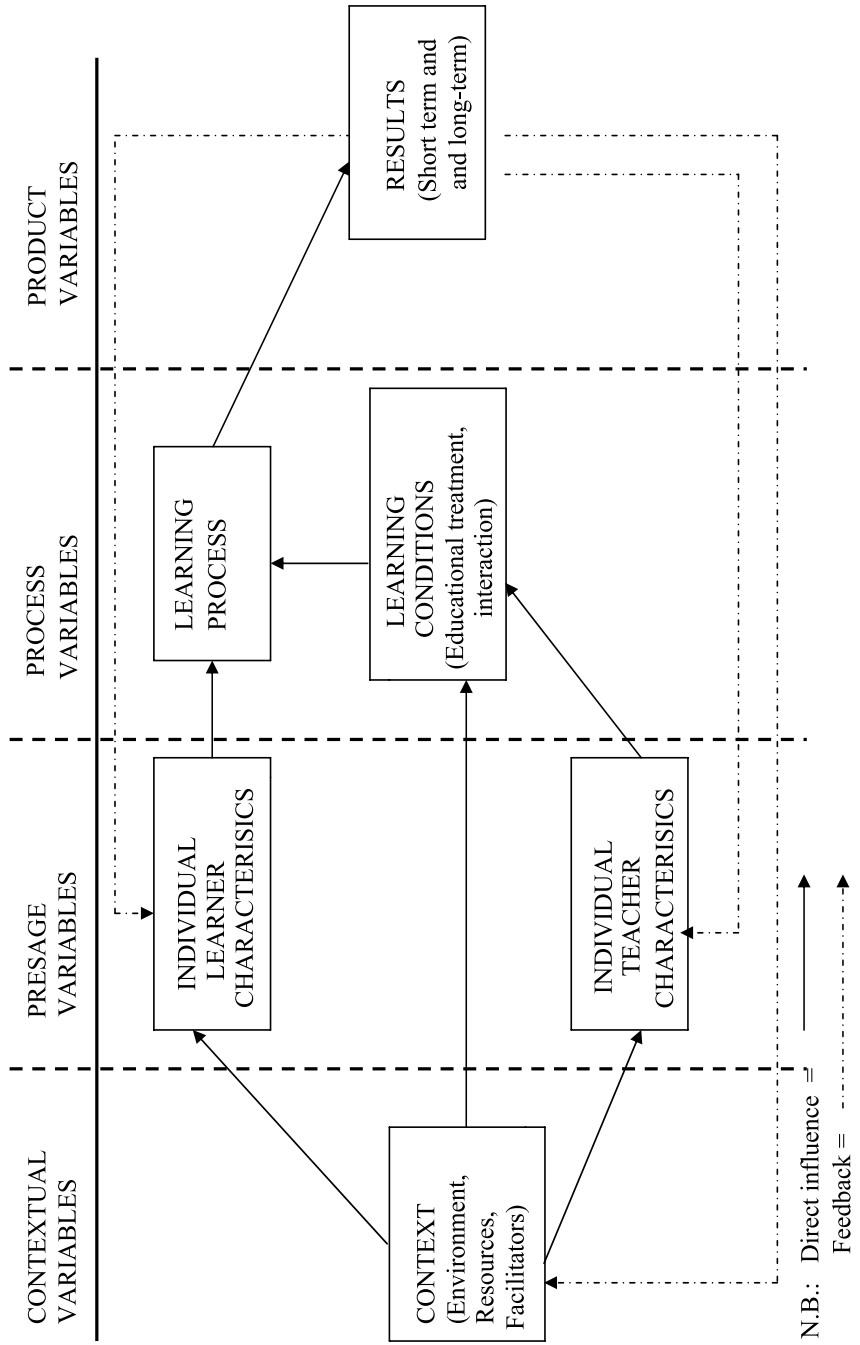
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APPENDIX I – Classroom Practices Within a Model of the Teaching-Learning Encounter
 (Adapted from Kouraogo, 1987, p.41)



APPENDIX II - Sample Observation Grid Filled Out during a Lesson on Essay Writing

Matière: Rédaction **Date:** 9/11/2007 **Thème:** Les activités de vacances **Matériel:** Texte

Objetif: A partir d'un sujet, faire la chasse aux idées, formuler des phrases et constituer un texte de rédaction en respectant les trois parties (introduction, développement, conclusion)

Démarche	Activités du maître	Activités des élèves	Observations (Bonnes pratiques pédagogiques)
Rappel	Le maître : - invite les élèves à rappeler les différentes parties d'un devoir de rédaction	Les élèves apportent les réponses attendues	Rappel de la présentation d'un devoir de rédaction et de l'équilibre de ses différentes parties
Motivation	A partir de questions, fait découvrir le sujet de rédaction. Sujet : « C'est la période de l'hivernage, votre école organise une plantation d'arbres. Décrivez l'événement et les espèces plantées, puis indiquez les précautions prises pour l'entretien des plantes »	" "	- Invite permanente à la formulation correcte des phrases - Proposition d'un sujet réel qui a vu la participation des élèves et des maîtres
Compréhension du sujet	- Pose des questions pour amener les élèves à comprendre le sujet	" "	- Utilisation de deux tableaux muraux (à l'avant et à l'arrière tenant compte de la disposition des élèves)
Recherche des idées pour l'introduction, le développement et la conclusion	- amène les élèves par des questions à formuler des phrases se rapportant à l'introduction, au développement et à la conclusion	Les élèves nomment les espèces plantées, leur nombre, parlent de l'entretien, de la protection, de l'arrosage, de l'utilité des arbres	- Le maître se préoccupe de la participation effective de tous les élèves. Il incite, stimule les moins participatifs à intervenir
Construction des phrases	- invite les élèves par groupes à formuler des phrases à partir des idées trouvées, pour chaque partie de la rédaction	Les élèves formulent des phrases qui sont lues et approuvées par l'ensemble de la classe et du maître	- Les bonnes productions sont répétées par plusieurs élèves et écrites dans les cahiers de brouillon ou sur les ardoises
Exercices	- fait lire les meilleures productions		Répartition des tâches par groupe dans la phase de formulation des phrases, puis mise en commun