

*Full Length Research Paper*

# Developing multiliteracies through bilingual education in Burkina Faso

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**Being literate involves being able to move from the ability to read and write to include different forms of knowledge and modes of communication of the milieu (drumming, dancing, story-telling, etc.). This article examines the new literacy allowed through the existence of two types of schools (bilingual and monolingual) in Burkina Faso, in West Africa, and how the two affect the development of literacy and cultural sustainability of their graduates. Since 1994, this country has moved from a French only educational system inherited from colonization to a bilingual one. In this context, bilingual education means the learning of two languages (African language and French) and the indigenous knowledge and ways of learning. The data is based on a qualitative study conducted during 2006 and 2007 in this country. Twenty semi-structured interviews were conducted with participants from bilingual schools and from monolingual schools. They analyze the impact of their schooling path on their literacy development and cultural identity by looking at the language spoken and written, and the information they use and produce.**

**Key words:** Multiliteracies, postcolonial education, Africa.

## INTRODUCTION

This article is concerned with the impact of two different types of schooling on literacy development and cultural sustainability. It compares a bilingual schooling path with a monolingual schooling path and their long-term effects on the literacy development of individuals and their community in Burkina Faso.

The motivation for this study came from my four-month teaching internship in a monolingual public school in Ouagadougou in 2003. Facing the students' lack of linguistic comprehension existing under the monolingual educational system in Burkina Faso motivated me to identify the root causes of this lack, as well as to seek educational alternatives. The first day I came to my internship school the pupils stood and said in French, the formal welcoming for a female guest: "Boonjour maaadame" (Observation conducted in a grade one monolingual school on January 18th 2006). They knew that they were greeting me, but they didn't know that they were saying Bonjour/madame. From day one, I realized that although I was teaching in a neighborhood near the University of Ouagadougou, pupils came to school without knowing French.

## Burkina Faso's linguistic landscape

The existence of multiple languages is typical throughout the West African sub-region (Halaoui, 2005). Burkina Faso is a multilingual country with 59 spoken languages. The Mossis, who speak Mooré, represent five million of the country's total population of fourteen million. It is estimated that 48% of the country's population speaks Mooré (Wolff, 2006). According to Kédérébégo (1998), 90% of the population speaks 14 national languages. These are the indigenous language of the country, and they are the languages spoken by the Burkinabè (The noun and the adjective Burkinabè remain invariable to respect the original orthography of the word). They do not have legal recognition except for the law n°013/96/ADP that states that the national languages can be used along with French as media for instruction in the public schools. Despite this socio-linguistic reality and the fact that only 10 to 15% of the population (an urban educated elite) speaks French on a daily basis, French is still the official language (Nikiéma, 2000). The implication of having French as the official language is that all prestigious func-

tions in the society are conducted in French: public administration, political campaigns, legislation, the media and higher education. Language policies are a heritage of colonization; French colonizers implemented their Mission civilisatrice which imposed French language in all domains especially in education to “civilize”. During colonization schools were created in Burkina Faso for linguistic and cultural assimilation. The African languages were deliberately relegated to the status of dialects. The actual linguistic landscape in Burkina Faso illustrated what Freire and Macedo (1987) describe as a language policy that denigrates the indigenous language through the imposition of a foreign language and the non-assignment of indigenous languages to roles in the serious and formal domains of public administration. This is exclusionary and therefore tantamount to a rape on democracy in the way that it takes millions ‘out of the dialogue’ to borrow Kassahun Checole’s [Kassahun Chicole made this statement during the Asmara, Eritrea 2000 conference titled “Against All Odds: African Languages and Literature into the 21st Century”. He was the organizer and publisher of the conference that produced the highly publicized the *Asmara Declaration*, which provides a list of recommendations for the promotion of African languages and literature (cited in Omoniyi 2003).

### Burkina Faso’s primary schools

From the beginning of colonial times, children have been taught in French, a language that they do not understand. In that context bilingual education means a transitional system starting with the child’s first language and gradually transferring to French. Burkina Faso’s first bilingual school started in 1994 with the financial support of a Swiss Non-Government Organization (NGO) named Oeuvre Suisse d’entraide ouvrière (OSEO). Confronted by a social movement connected to this school, Mathieu Ouédraogo, the Minister for Basic Education and Literacy (MEBA) at the time, adopted in 1996 a law that allowed the use of languages other than French in formal education. Learning from the top down educational reform failure of 1984, the government decided to opt for a grass-root level up transformation. Therefore, since 1996, the parent association of a given school can transform the monolingual school in their community to a bilingual school if they wish to do so. Within one year, more than five hundred requests for transformation were received by the MEBA (Ilboudo, 2003). According to Prakash and Esteva (1998) this approach can capture the essence of their tradition and a pedagogy steeped in learning and freedom that “comes from belonging; from a sense of place- to which they belong and nurture; and which belongs to them, nurtures them” (p. 55). In 2006, 112 bilingual schools using national languages alongside French offered an alternative to the failing monolingual system. I allow myself to use the term “failing” when I see that in 2000, the all-French system has lead to a

youth literacy rate (As defined by UNESCO as the ability to read and write with understanding a simple short statement related to his/her life) of 31% (UNESCO, 2007), and a grade-repeating average in primary education of 13% (UNESCO, 2007). After 14 years, the alternative bilingual system has proven academic results (Ilboudo, 2003), its material is now ready in eight national languages (the objective is to achieve the 14 national languages), and bilingual pedagogy is now being offered in the teacher training program. As a result, the government is planning to generalize bilingual education throughout the national territory.

Since 2005, both types of schools have been under the same administrative structure, namely the Ministry for Basic Education and Literacy (MEBA). Bilingual and monolingual schools are both free, public, and follow the same curriculum approved by the MEBA. They benefit from similar infrastructures and receive the same funding. All graduating classes write the same national examination in French at the end of elementary school. Bilingual schools embody some characteristics of the indigenous educational system that existed previous to colonization. For example, to the basic national curriculum, they add cultural activities like story telling, songs, dance, music and productive activities such as agriculture, cattle rearing, and woodworking. These are specific to the economic and cultural activities of the community in which the school is situated. As in indigenous education, parent participation in those activities is part of the philosophy of bilingual schools. The ownership of the educational process is thus given back to the community. Bilingual education is more than learning how to read and write in two languages, it puts cultural sustainability and empowerment at the centre of the educational mission.

### METHODOLOGY

The fieldwork for this study was done in 2006 and 2007 in a village located near the periphery of the capital, Ouagadougou. The village is composed of 1655 inhabitants (Kibora et al., 1999). In this rural zone, agriculture and cattle breeding are the main economic activities. Bilingual schools have existed for over ten years in this village. Two bilingual schools using Mooré and French and one monolingual school within a radius of 5 km were chosen as research sites.

The method used to assess the relationship between language instruction and literacy development was twenty semi-structured interviews with nine graduates of the bilingual schools and eleven graduates of the monolingual school. The 20 semi-structured interviews have a quasi-equal gender representation; that is four female graduates from bilingual schools, five female graduates from monolingual schools, five male graduates from bilingual schools, six male graduates from monolingual schools. Each pseudonym given to the participant indicates their membership in the bilingual or monolingual group. For example, francophone names (Mathieu, Ariane, Amélie, Jean, etc.) are given to graduates from monolingual schools and Burkinabè names (Ouango, Wendyam, Nouaga, Pousga, etc.) to graduates from bilingual schools. All female graduates from bilingual schools have a pseudonym that ends with

**Table 1.** Participant's Spoken Language(s).

Language(s) spoken	Bilingual schools graduates	Monolingual schools graduates
Mooré only	i. Rabi (24) ii. Simandé (27) iii. Zouli (25) iv. Yamba (22)	i. Yves (29) ii. Julie (22) iii. Marie (24)
Mooré and French	i. Wendyam (20) ii. Ouango (23) iii. Noaga (24) iv. Roukia (25) v. Pousga (27)	i. Jean (27) ii. Fabrice (21) iii. Louis (20) iv. Richard (22) v. Ariane (20) vi. Claire (25) vi. Amélie (23)
Mooré, French and Jula		Mathieu (38)

the letter A. Beside their name, their age is presented in parentheses. The results compare cultural identity and literacies of graduates from bilingual and monolingual schools who are 20 - 38 years old.

## RESULTS AND DISCUSSION

The results section of this paper presents three different aspects of the findings: how the bilingual and monolingual schooling affects the use of spoken languages, how it affects the use of written languages and how it affects the use of different sources of information among the graduates. Each of the three sub-sections has two types of content: 1.) the general tendencies for the graduates of the two types of schooling and 2.) the analysis of the exceptional cases.

### Use of spoken languages

**Table 1:** All participants speak Mooré in their family and their community on a daily basis. However, 5/9 of bilingual schools graduates and 7/10 of monolingual schools graduates can speak in French if they have to. All the seven participants who only speak Mooré state that they can read and write in French. This language use reflects those of the Mossis. All the participants are Mossis and live in a surrounding Mossis village. The Mossis represent 48% of the population. In this geographic area, the lingua franca is Mooré. The Mossis are the dominant linguistic group and therefore do not feel the same pressure to speak other national languages as the linguistic minorities. Linguistic minorities have to speak Mooré in addition to their own national language.

A particular case in this study is Mathieu (38) who speaks three languages. This participant says that he speaks Jula, the lingua franca of the South West, because his parents migrated from the Ivory Coast. This

situation is really common for a lot of older Mossis who were forced to work in other French colonies between 1932 and 1947. Consequently, Mossis families had to speak Jula. Between 1932 and 1947, the Burkinabè colony, named Upper Volta at that time, was split with Ivory Coast, Niger and Mali (Kuba et al., 2003). During this period, Upper Volta was the human resources reservoir for the development of Ivory Coast (Jaffré, 2000; Yao, 2003). Since the election of Laurent Gbagbo in 2000 in Ivory Coast, there are xenophobic comportments and discourses towards Burkinabè so families are coming back to Burkina Faso. This is the case of Mathieu (38) who grew up in Ivory Coast and came back recently.

Unlike the general profile, Louis (20) is the only one who stated that he would speak only in French with his children:

-CL (researcher): At home, you will speak Mooré or French with your children? (À la maison tu vas parler en mooré ou bien tu vas parler en français ?)

-Louis (20): If I know French, I speak French only (Mais si je connais français, je parle français seulement.)

This answer was surprising, because his level of French was poor. During the interview, we had to switch to Mooré seven times because he did not understand the questions asked. This graduate from a monolingual school confirms the theory of Somé (2003), Benson (2002) and Datchoua (1973) that monolingual schools restrict the use of national languages and devalue the associated culture. Louis (20) illustrates the so called "cultural shipwreck" [Naufrage culturel (traduction libre, Constance Lavoie, May 25th 2008)] by Ki-Zerbo (1990). Louis's (20) answers gave rise to debate with his colleagues who were seated beside him during our interview. His colleagues disapproved of his choice to abandon his language. The oldest man asked us to rectify his answer. In Burkinabè context, cultural choices

**Table 2.** Participant's Redden and Written Language(s).

Redden and Written Language(s)	Bilingual schools graduates	Monolingual schools graduates
Mooré only	Roukia (25)	
French only		i. Jean (27) ii. Marie (24)
Mooré and French	i. Rabi (24) ii. Simandé (27) iii. Wendyam (20) iv. Ouango (23) v. Zouli (25) vi. Noaga (24) vii. Yamba (22) viii. Pousga (27)	i. Claire (25) ii. Fabrice (21) iii. Louis (20) iv. Richard (22) v. Julie (22) vi. Amélie (23) vii. Yves (29)
French and English		Ariane (20)
Mooré, French and Jula		Mathieu (38)

are not individual ones, but collective ones. Each village has its cultural chief, an old man who is the guardian of tradition. A similar role is given to the oldest man of each family. Consequently, Louis (20) will have to follow the will of his community and his family.

### Use of written language(s)

**Table 2:** All graduates from bilingual schools, aged between 20 and 27 years old, still know how to read and write in Mooré and in French. This result shows that the learning is sustainable although the bilingual schools follow a transitional model. According to Heugh (2006), the national language has to be used as a medium of instruction during 50% of the primary path to remain permanent. This study shows that the participants still read and write in French and Mooré in spite of the fact that Mooré was the medium of instruction during only 10% of the time at the end of primary bilingual schools.

Interestingly, eight out of eleven graduate of monolingual schools decided of their own free will to take a literacy course in Mooré for economic and cultural reasons. Literacy in both languages offers them an economic advantage in that village where they can work for the literacy centre, the bilingual schools, and the community newspaper.

Roukia (25) is a particular case. She decided to abandon French, because she does not need it in her milieu or in her work as a Mooré instructor at the literacy centre.

-SJ (co-researcher): In which ethnic language do you write?

*La yâmb gùsda ne buud goam bùgo?*

-Roukia (25): In Mooré. *Moore.*

-SJ (co-researcher): You never write in French?

*Yâmb ka gùs fârend lae lae ye?*

-Roukia (25): No, I've stopped writing in French.

*Ô ô, mam basa fârensè wâ.*

As Roukia (25) illustrates, the sustainability of multiliteracies is dependent upon their uses in society and language policies (Napon, 2002). As Bourdieu (1982) proposes with his idea of "linguistic market" languages have to be tight with employment in order to be valued.

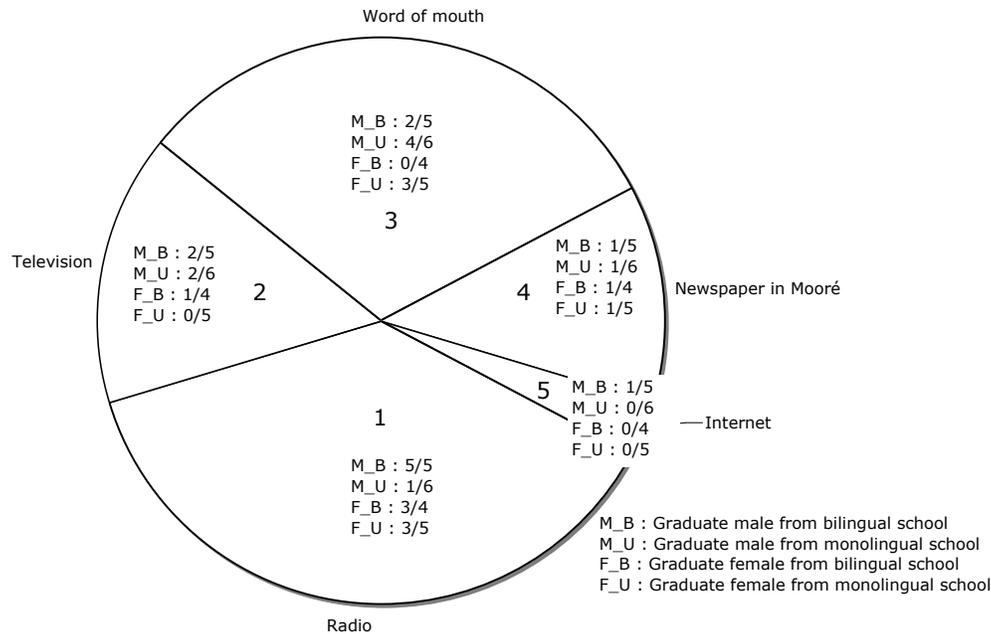
In general, sixteen out of twenty participants recognized that multiliteracies allow them to diffuse their realities within the country and outside. Multiliteracies allow them to engage in dialectic exchanges at the local, national, and international level. Knowing two languages multiplies the communication possibilities and intercultural exchanges between different ethnic groups and with foreigners.

Wendyam (20): The use of French is to help us to speak and write to someone, because there are some places where you cannot speak Mooré. It is necessary to have French [L'utilité du français c'est de nous permettre de parler à quelqu'un et d'écrire à quelqu'un, car il y a des endroits où on ne peut pas parler le mooré. C'est le français nécessairement].

Bilingual education permits Africans to participate in the dominant discourse by accessing the international language of communication and the associated literature, while at the same time preserving a part of their linguistic diversity and its associated cultural heritage. In Burkina Faso, the international language used is definitively French, because English is taught only at the secondary level and only 16% of children (UNESCO, 2007) access this level of instruction.

### Use of different sources of information

I was interested to know about the languages they used



**Figure 1.** Source of information.

to gather information. As the Figure 1 shows, the participants access information mostly by radio and by word of mouth. Former students of bilingual schools used slightly more radio and former students of monolingual schools slightly more word of mouth. Participants said that they listen to radio broadcasting in French and in the national language. Television and newspapers are difficult to access, because the village has no electricity and the newspapers are expensive for the population. The ones who read the newspaper read it in Mooré, because the publisher is located in their village and it is therefore more accessible. Neither graduates from monolingual nor bilingual schools read the newspaper in French.

I like to highlight that Mathieu (38) and Ariane (20), two graduates of monolingual schools, read the newspaper in Mooré thanks to the literacy classes they took in their national language. Being bilingual in a national language and an international language allows participants to access diverse sources of information. Narayan (2004) writes that:

Newspapers published in local languages constitute a favorable environment for the development of actions within the informed citizens. Timely access to information published by independent sources, in local languages, is of particular importance since we now see, in more and more countries, a delegation of a part of the authority to local communities (p. 24). Newspapers and radios in national languages contribute to a plurality of voices and opinion. Those who produce the “formal” information are no longer the only ones who master French. Different media and language for information contribute to the democratization of information because adult literacy

campaigns are conducted in national languages and 85% of the population does not speak French. Accordingly, Oudet (1999) reports a Burkinabè initiative made to express their own views, share experiences and pass on practical tips:

Although rural people are largely illiterate more and more farmers now know how to read and write in their own language. But often there is nothing to read because information that could be useful to them is printed in French. ... We have started to produce a magazine, every three months, to which farmers themselves can contribute (p. 2)

The notion of “multiliteracies,” acknowledges the existence of multiple and diverse texts as well as asserting the multiple channels and media of communication (Cope and Kalantzis, 2000). As Omoniyi (2003) mentions:

Multi-literacy is thus conceptualized as an enabling project to facilitate greater African contribution to global knowledge production, redress the existing hegemony between northern producers and southern consumers while at the same time exploring the potential to grow African languages and equip them to disseminate knowledge to large numbers of African peoples. In essence, one is advocating a sort of liberation literacy (p. 140).

Consequently, to be successful in the context of Burkina Faso, or even Africa more generally, literacy education should be multilingual in order to reflect and communicate the diversity of meanings conveyed in languages other than the official languages.

Bilingualism offers more opportunities to get access and to produce information. In addition, although the number of participants is limited in this study, the data tends to indicate that the more the participant is educated more source of information he/she uses. Ouango (23) and Mathieu (38) are the two most educated participants in each group and they are the ones who are the most informed and use the larger variety of sources. In summary, the level of instruction and bilingualism are two variables that contribute to the ability to access diverse sources of information.

## Conclusion

This paper compares the impact of two different types of schooling (bilingual and monolingual in Burkina Faso) on literacy development and cultural sustainability. In the light of the data analyzed, we may conclude that the monolingual and the bilingual schools sustain the Mooré in its oral form and develop functional literacy skills in French language. Even though there is a substantial common set of skills, the bilingual education and adult literacy centers in Mooré gives its graduates an extra set of skills: proficiency in reading and writing in Mooré, more job possibilities, and more dialectic exchanges at local, national and international level. Those skills are essential for reflecting the language uses of the milieu, acknowledging the diversity of Burkina Faso, bridging the gap between school and family literacy by using a common language of communication, and for empowering parents to take an active role in the education of their children in contributing to the school's cultural activities by sharing proverbs, tales and traditional music and dance. That is why, even though it is a small-scale qualitative study, I see that the bilingual education acknowledges and contribute to the sustainability of the multiliteracy of their society.

Bilingual schools acknowledge the multiliteracies and the associated knowledge heritage. Reaffirming the richness of indigenous ways of learning with community involvement and cultural activities. This form of education is an illustration of what Freire and Macedo (1987) call literacy for liberation and empowerment. The schools gradually belong to a community instead of being a white institution imported through colonization. Being bilingual in a national and an international language allows participants to access diverse sources of information and to voice their reality to a larger audience. Bilingual education merges linguistic borders, thereby affirming the local culture. African and international language become partners for quality education and for an equitable education system (Sanogo, 2005).

Pierre (19): They talk about globalization, but globalization isn't an acculturation, it's a meeting of civilizations. (...) I say that it (bilingual education) teaches the children to at least know their mother tongue as well as learning about and discovering other languages. (On nous parle de mondialisation, mais la mondialisation c'est pas une acculturation, c'est une rencontre des civilisations. (...) Je me dis ça apprend à l'enfant au moins à connaître sa langue nationale et en plus d'acquérir des connaissances et de découvrir d'autres langues)

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