

Parents' Associations in Burkina Faso's Schools

Written by Maxime COMPAORÉ

Translated by Samantha ISZLER

Introduction

In all human societies, children's basic education is a priority that falls on the family unit. Thus, the individual and family code of Burkina Faso specifies that parents are primarily responsible for their children's education. In practice, the family has a significant influence on their child from the time they are born. So that this responsibility is executed in a harmonious way, it is up to the parents to organise themselves and to pool their abilities to ensure a certain stability and balance that promotes children's development. With the family being the ultimate educational environment, parents must work to satisfy the fundamental needs of the child.

During the colonial period, children recruited for school were the responsibility of the administration who ensured the allocation of school supplies, lodging, clothing, and food. Most often, parents contributed to the care of their children through a supply/provision of vegetables and spices to live on (millet, corn, yams, beans, leaves for sauces, spices ...). These contributions were solicited from the whole population as mandatory services, and were not only the responsibility of the parents sending their children to school.

Even if the involvement of parents takes different forms according to different periods, we can assert that in the educational process family has always played a significant role. Consequently, parents appear as leading educators, indispensable actors seen as irreplaceable in the educational work. Thus, in order to improve their children's chances of academic success, the well educated and most dedicated parents strive to follow their school attendance in collaboration with the teachers.

More and more attached to the quality of education that they desire for their children, many parents affirm their presence at school through voluntary membership in support structures such as Parent Teacher Associations (PTA) and Mother Educators' Associations (MEA).

This article is based on the information collected in six provinces of Burkina Faso involving the heads of the PTA/MEA, the teachers, and the decentralized structures of the Ministry of Basic Education and Literacy. It aims specifically to appreciate the quality of the contribution of the PTA/MEA in the process of invigoration of the education system of Burkina Faso. It is a matter of presenting the method of organisation and operation of parents' associations and analyzing the quality of their contribution in the life of primary education establishments.

Organization and Operation of Parents' Associations

The role of PTA/MEA

In 1958 the organization and operation of parents' associations were defined for the first time in Burkina Faso through authorization no 27/INT on May 2nd. This text which authorized the creation of parents' associations remained long unknown to parents, most of whom were illiterate. The implementation of the measures of this text was done very slowly resting on the few educated parents, particularly in cities. For example, the Federation of parents' associations of Upper Volta was established in December 1965 under the authority of Laurent Ghilat.

The participation of parents' associations of rural areas (local communities) in the activity of these associations will be made in a progressive manner. It will know a remarkable rise during the revolutionary period following the adoption of new texts specifying the role of different participants of education in the management of educational structures in 1986 and 1987.

Raabo (a judicial text similar to a ministerial ruling) no AN-V-19/ CNR/ EDUC/ MATS/ MEFSN of October 14, 1987 bringing the creation of parents' associations into public and private preschool, primary, and secondary education establishments was reread and modified by ruling no 91-133/ MEBAM/MESSRS/MAT/MEFP of October 3, 1991.

According to the measures of article 4 of the text bringing the organization of parents' associations , “the parent teacher association (PTA) is a democratic organization bringing together all of the parents and guardians of students of the same establishment or school group of public or private, primary or secondary, education.” According to the same text, the role of the PTA is to permit parents to unite their efforts within an organized setting allowing them to participate fully in the education, instruction, and development of their children.

Originally, these associations had then been created for the purpose of supporting the government's effort to manage educational structures. The PTA had to participate actively in the improvement of academic life, parents' information about the life and organization of schools, and the encouragement of students and parents. Through their contributions, the PTA contributed to creating living and working conditions conducive to children's development.

In establishments' consultative bodies, the PTA representatives act on behalf of the parents who elected them. They are required to keep summaries of the meetings which they participated in. In this way, the group of parents obtains the information concerning the organisation of school activities/operations.

In practice, the most organized PTA offices manage to bring substantial assistance to the educational establishments on the basis of fund-raising conducted by the parents. Generally

speaking, the PTAs contribute to the funding of the establishment's activities to avoid malfunctions often caused by an absence or insufficiency of state provisions.

For the purpose of reinforcing the role of parents, and more specifically of mothers, in the educational process of Burkina Faso, Mother-Educators' Associations (MEA) were created. The very first MEAs were created in 1992 in the province of Sissili. Their success and efficiency led the political and administrative authorities to propose their diffusion throughout the country.

According to the statutes of the MEAs, mothers or tutors of students of the same school can be members of a MEA as well as all female volunteers interested in the life of the school. Unlike the PTAs which are found at all educational levels (primary, secondary, and high), the MEAs represent a distinct organization in the primary education establishments.

The objectives pursued by the MEAs include the search for improved involvement of women alongside men in the management of the educational community. The implementation of MEAs aims also to allow mothers to intervene in a specific way in the operation of schools, in the education and development of their children in general and of girls in particular. It is then a framework designed to ensure a constant and close connection between the school and the mother-educators.

The creation of the MEA is judged necessary by other participants in the education system because it fills a gap. It contributes to revolutionizing the educational system. Through the activities of the MEA, the women can better sensitize their husbands to the education of their children. In most traditional societies, the women are closer to the children, so they are better placed to help them. Thanks to the work of the MEA, school can be well accepted even in the most resistant environments. It is able to allow women to participate effectively in the school

life because they are more available and more engaged than their husbands. They know how to take initiative for the well being of their children.

Economically, the MEA presents itself as a system through which women can share their resources which they will invest profitably in schools to improve the living and working conditions of the students and teachers.

The MEAs works in close collaboration with the PTA who assists them in the field. The two associations that pursue the same goals maintain an involved relationship. They both strive to improve access to school and to find ways to keep students in school ensuring the basic conditions for good learning.

The implementation in schools

Information and Awareness

Generally, the PTA/MEA take advantage of all occasions (general assemblies, markets , social demonstrations, information reports) to provide information about activities that are conducted in educational establishments. They act as the spokesmen of the educational administration in the villages and in this way contribute to the integration of the school in the area for a more complete education for the children enrolled in the school.

In addition to the information generally provided upon the recruitment of new students (birth date, parents' social conditions, ...) the PTA/MEAs help raise parents' awareness of the necessity of education for all of their children and primarily for girls. The parents' associations also invest in the parents' awareness in regards to their children's schooling and in respect to the payment dates for PTA membership fees or enrollment fees at private schools. According to the heads of the PTA/MEA, the work of raising awareness is often done door to door and allows for

convincing certain parents who still remain hostile toward school to decide to send their children before the recruiting committees.

The PTA/MEA's actions in the area of information and awareness are often supported by local authorities (high commissioners, prefects, traditional chiefs) and the decentralized service officers of the MEBA (Department of Basic Education and Literacy) (DPEBA [Provincial Command of Basic Education and Literacy] , district head of basic education, service of girls' education). Awareness generally concerns the monitoring and maintaining of children's school attendance, with a particular emphasis on girls. Other themes are also covered throughout awareness sessions, notably concerning questions about forced marriage, the liberation of women, female circumcision, students' extracurricular activities, etc.

Recruitment

According to the measures in effect at the level of the MEBA the PTAs have two representatives on the recruitment committee for primary school students. Because of the good understanding they have of the area, it is up to them to provide information about the situation of certain parents to the other members of the committee. This information can allow the committee to make better decisions when considering social matters.

In certain schools, the MEAs participate in the work of other recruitment committees. During the recruitment period , they ensure informational and incentive efforts specifically for girls' education. In areas where the weight of tradition still does not support the education of children in general or of young girls in particular, they persuade their husbands, fathers, and acquaintances to send the school-aged children to school. This outreach work accomplished by

the PTA/MEA allows many schools to welcome more and more children and above all more girls.

School Life

Monitoring the education of students

During the school year, the diligence and attendance of students are monitored day to day by the heads of the PTA/MEA. Within the effective PTA/MEA, each member of the office has a week on-duty at the school. This duty period consists of spending each morning at the school and writing down the academic attendance of students. If students have repeated absences, the PTA/MEA get in contact with the families to better understand the situation and find a solution to the problem. On this specific issue of monitoring students, 100% of mother-educators surveyed believe that their actions have a positive impact on attendance. Moreover, this belief is confirmed by nearly all surveyed teachers.

In the opinion of teachers, the two associations also encourage the parents, students, and teachers in their work. They follow the progress of the students and, after the evaluations, reward the best ones with various gifts and supplies. Thanks to the action of these associations, the students in general and the girls in particular experience a reduction in household chores being demanded of them, which allows them to dedicate more time to studying.

The school cafeteria

School cafeterias are currently developed in the direction of rural societies, where school attendance is severely strained because the low income of parents does not allow them to afford educational expenses, to always ensure the children's daily meals. Additionally, the PTA/MEA

support the school cafeterias by bearing the costs of the cooks' salaries, the transportation of food supplies, and the supply of wood and water.

The politics of school cafeterias, long supported by the Catholic Relief Services (CRS), is currently in the middle of a reform as the result of the progressive withdrawal of the latter. The state is trying to find workaround solutions to the situation but many complications with the provision of supplies remain. In many schools, the PTA/MEA are obligated to intervene to support the operation of school cafeterias through the purchase of food in addition to the received allocations.

To deal with insufficient financial resources, the MEAs dedicate themselves to practical work (taking over meal preparations, water and wood supplies, gardening, fattening sheep and cows, etc.) in order to find additional resources for the operation of schools.

With the provision of food from the CRS, the MEAs participate in the implementation of a strategy to support the education of young girls through take-home food rations. This strategy consists of each month rewarding all young girls with 95% attendance with a provision of 5kg (11 lb) of food. The students' parents appreciate this strategy and wish to see it extended to the boys. But with the progressive withdrawal of the CRS, this strategy is gradually disappearing unless the PTA/MEA structures itself to step in through the implementation of endogenous cafeterias.

Mediation

In the event of conflict (problems between teachers and administration, teachers and students) or of protest (especially strikes) in educational establishments, sometimes the PTA/MEA intervene to reconcile the parties. Sometimes they also initiate meetings with a higher

authority to bring up the issue of a lack of teachers in their establishments. With the regionalization of education management, the PTA/MEA represent more and more a direct force capable of bringing more cohesion to the organization and management of educational establishments.

The organization of examinations and competitions (competitive examinations?)

What emerges from our interviews is that the PTA/MEA provides support in multiple forms for the organization of academic exams in the establishments. For mock tests for example, their support ranges from the allocation of composition materials to free refreshments to examiners through financial contributions for grading.

During school exams at the end of the year, the PTA/MEA of examination centres organize themselves to receive traveling students and teachers. Thus, students are collectively welcomed into the classrooms. Due to a lack of rooms for rent in certain areas, the PTAs intervene to make rooms equipped with mats and mattresses available to the jury members and the presidents of examination centers.

According to the testimony of teachers in rural areas, when school students must travel to take the certification of primary education exam and the competitive exam to enter sixth grade, the PTA/MEA arrange for them to be accompanied by cooks who prepare food for them. Thus, the students benefit from good nutrition and perform better on their tests.

Investments / Commitments

Apart from the PTA/MEA in the cities of Ouagadougou and Bobo-Dioulasso, all of the other PTAs/MEAs always participate in the development of the educational infrastructure. When the construction of a school is planned in a given village, the beneficiary population is always

asked to find a provisional site to host the first year of students before the school is constructed. Most often, the community comes together to construct a shed that serves as a classroom for the first students.

These makeshift facilities allow teachers to begin their classes. At the same time, communities are asked to gather aggregates (gravel, sand) for the startup of the construction work. For the execution of all of this work, it is generally the PTA who plays a leading role as principal beneficiary.

In the case of schools that are already built, the PTA/MEA are often asked to ensure building maintenance. Certain PTA/MEA claim to have done construction or repairs to stores, kitchens, or teachers' housing using local materials. The solicitation of students' parents in the development or maintenance of educational facilities is a reality in Burkina Faso's primary schools, especially in rural areas. The resources rallied by the PTA/MEA also serve to support the teachers while carrying out their duties.

Support for teachers

The relationship between the PTA/MEA and teachers established in primary schools are generally good. The teachers benefit from the support of a community that sees them as educators with a role in development. Thus, the PTA/MEA intervene to help the teachers improve their living and working conditions.