

NOTE : A longer version of this article will appear in Ulrike Wiegelmann (Hg.): *Afrikanisch-europäisch-islamisch? Entwicklungsdynamik des Erziehungswesens in Senegal*, under the title “Searching for Signs of Success: Enlarging the Concept of ‘Education’ to Include Senegalese Languages”

“Learning to Read Woke Me Up!”: Motivations, and Constraints, in Learning to Read in Pulaar (Senegal)

1. The educational context in Senegal: French in formal education for children and non-formal education for adults in Senegalese languages

The official language of Senegal, both in the administration and in education, is French.¹ However, there are twenty-two “national languages,” eight of which have been officially recognized but which are only peripherally used in the educational system.

Given that Senegal's current illiteracy rate hovers around 65%, we need to ask some fundamental questions about this educational system. What do we know about education in French in Senegal today? Roughly, 62% of children between the ages of seven and twelve are enrolled each year in the French-language school system. But each year at the 7th grade entrance exam, 75% of the students taking the exam are failed and forced out of the educational system definitively. A large number of students are failed out of the system at this point in their educations simply because there aren't enough places for them in higher educational institutions.

Furthermore, emerging data showing the inadequacies of this system is not only

¹ The new president, Abdoulaye Wade, has announced that this will change, so perhaps the verb should be “has been” rather than “is”.

quantitative. Qualitatively as well, we can easily see its weaknesses. In a recently published dictionary of agricultural terminology in an African language (Pulaar), the authors explain that they decided to compile this dictionary after their “frustrating attempts to transmit scientific knowledge” in an agricultural extension program. They tell the story of speaking with “...a young technician at our institute for agricultural research who was in daily contact with researchers there, who constantly spoke with them in French about every detail concerning growing cotton, who carried out experiments for them. And yet one day he admitted that until he had read the version in Pulaar, he had never understood the booklet written in French about the insects which destroy a cotton crop.” (Tourneux and Dairou, 1998, p. 9) As they exclaim, “If he couldn’t understand it, who else possibly could?”

The formal educational system in French is increasingly unable to satisfy the demands of a growing population that wants an education which responds to its needs. Therefore, non-formal education in national languages has become an increasingly interesting option, going back to the early 50’s when the first mass literacy campaigns promoted by UNESCO were introduced in Senegal. Fary Ka, university linguist in Senegal, calls national language education “...an alternative to the failed mirage of formal education (‘schooling’) which creates civil servants, *elites* and intellectuals.” (Ka, 1996, p. 11) Today, in face of high unemployment amongst all school graduates—even at the university level—the alternative of national language education is emerging as an important option.

This article focuses on experiences from this expanding educational sector in Senegalese languages, which is by definition non-formal in approach and status, and which often implicates adults rather than children. In particular it focuses on the spread of a movement for literacy amongst speakers of the Pulaar language, the second largest language group in Senegal, looking at both what motivates them, and what constraints they face. It is based on the experiences of one non-profit organization, *Associates in Research & Education for Development (ARED)*, which publishes books and provides community trainings primarily in the Pulaar

language. Examples and quotations are all taken from various ARED training experiences.

2. A “grassroots social movement” for education in the Pulaar language

Faced with the weaknesses of the official educational system, individuals are turning, as adults, to a non-formal, community-based form of education in Senegalese languages. Furthermore, there exists a particular experience within the Pulaar-speaking community of Senegal that can properly be called a “grassroots movement for literacy” in that language. New literates with almost no education volunteer to teach literacy classes in their communities; participants pay a small fee to equip their classrooms; individual learners buy books. As Dora Madden points out, “In Senegal, Pulaar speakers are known for their motivation to work in literacy, and a large number of people teach literacy classes on a voluntary basis.... Everywhere in Senegal, the Pulaar language has its volunteers.” (Madden, 1990, p. 14) According to researcher Marie-Eve Humery, it is “...the lively personal engagement of Pulaar speakers which is at the origin of this movement in favor of the language. A hard core of ‘militants’ for both the culture and the language has succeeded in mobilizing the majority of Pulaar speakers.” (Humery, 1997, p. 74)

While the results of this process are often uneven, and problems abound, nevertheless, this spirited community movement is well worth further study. Educators and policymakers can learn some important lessons from this language community. The key to its success is the link which has been forged between *cultural identity, language and literacy*. As Madden discovered in an interview with a group of voluntary literacy teachers living on the outskirts of the Senegalese capital city, they felt that they “...must try to revitalize our culture. Literacy in the Pulaar language is one instrument for reaching that goal.” (Madden, 1990, p. 18) As a reason for becoming literate, this goes against the

usual assumption that functionality and economic incentives are essential to motivate learners. Rather, it shows what can be accomplished when culture and education become partners.

No longer does education mean alienation from the community. What seems to be the key element in all these activities is that *education in Pulaar has found a cultural echo*. The skill of learning how to read and write is not perceived of as an alienating factor, but as something which can help local initiatives move forward in both preserving and understanding the culture, and in the integration of new ideas into the existing system.

However, many questions are nevertheless raised about the results achieved with the investments made. Understandably, many literacy programs operate under the burden of having to continually prove their worth by evaluating the progress that participants are making. It is not surprising that funders and administrators of programs are often looking for signs of success that can be measured by tests similar to those they have all experiences as students themselves—even though participants themselves might have a very different criteria for evaluating the importance, efficacy, and impact of their classes. And many people are initially discouraged by the so-called “low level” of achievement in these classes. The Senegalese national newspaper once ran a front page article entitled “*Alphabétisation : des résultats en-deçà des investissements?*” (Soleil, August 26, 1999), which translates roughly as “Are the results of investment in literacy programs worth it?” The article continues with the observation that “In spite of the unexpectedly high demand to participate... the actual results are still disappointing: only 50% of the participants can read, only 40% can write and only 28% can do basic math.”

In this article, we go on to look at two factors which should be an important part of this discussion, namely, how do participants evaluate their learning?, and how must we evaluate the programs that we offer them?

3. Personal motivations for investing in literacy

In spite of this general enthusiasm, investing in becoming literate is no small task for most adults. It requires sacrifices in terms of time and money, even a certain humbling of oneself in order to dare try something totally new in which one is not at all certain of success. How much people sacrifice is poignantly painted in the following comments which were written by women who had attended a month-long intensive literacy training, living together at the site of the training because otherwise they would not have been able to attend. This training took place in a pastoral zone, where these women from mobile herding families could not find time to attend regular community classes during the year, given the mobility of the group.

- 🎬 *At first my husband was absolutely against the idea. Finally, he reluctantly agreed to let me go. But I left a lot of unresolved problems behind me. At home, there was no one to pound the millet, no one to go get the water, no one to look for firewood, no one to cook. Normally, I do all of that, and I had to leave it behind me.*
- 🎬 *When I left home, my husband and I were planting. I am the one who normally guides the horse that pulls the plow. So this year, we risk not having a big harvest since we had to stop our work right where it was.*
- 🎬 *I left my husband with his widowed sister. She is the one who is looking out for my children as well as her own. I have no idea how they are managing to eat during this period before we harvest and when stocks from last year are used up; but I'm here! It is my husband himself who brought me here, and then he returned to take care of the family.*
- 🎬 *At first, our village was reticent to let anyone participate in this literacy class. We had three meetings without being able to decide who would go from our village. Finally, my husband decided that I should attend the training. At the time, my youngest son was just weaned, and quite sick. I said I couldn't go unless he was better. But everyone started to encourage me to participate, no matter what. And everyone decided to help me by*

sending two other women to help at home.

If getting an education requires such a high degree of personal sacrifice, what motivates people to make the effort? How do they evaluate the experience? In another similar training, a male participant wrote the following as part of the final evaluation:

...This letter is to let you know that this training wasn't easy for me. Every day I had to leave my normal productive activities, which isn't good for someone who lives off of what he earns daily. Furthermore, every day I had to walk from my home to class [18 kilometers]. Since I don't have any means of transportation, I was very tired... But don't forget that however much I was tired, that is how much I gained from the training! I'd say this training is worth all of the effort, because now I can read and write correctly, and I learned all four math operations...

Students most often express their motivations and the benefits of attending literacy classes in terms of *impact on their lives*, not in terms of *acquired academic skills*. For example, a recent ARED evaluation of a literacy program uncovered the surprising belief that the presence of a literacy class had cut down on violence in the village. Because the class proposed that young men had to check their “arms” (knives and machettes) at the door of the classroom, a lengthy discussion ensued about where and why they carried these objects, which they needed as herders, but which also were too often used in personal disputes. Furthermore, people claimed that young people started spending more time studying than playing cards, an activity which could degenerate into conflicts. As a result, members of the class spontaneously responded “less violence and aggression” when asked about the impact of literacy in their community, and people were proud to claim that “the pen” had replaced “the sword” (literally “the knife”).

The following comments come from the final evaluation of a two-week intensive

training for twenty young women who wanted to become literacy teachers. The last day of the training, they were asked to write a letter to ARED, describing the impact of literacy on their lives. Their responses fell into two categories, either emphasizing the personal empowerment that came with literacy, or mentioning the fact that literacy and literacy classes have increased social interaction and cohesion. Two phrases clearly expressed these two possibilities: “studying woke me up” and “now I dare work in a group”. These core ideas were fleshed out with many examples of how participants saw the impact of literacy—and literacy classes—on their lives:

“Studying woke me up!”

- 🎬 *Now I can take notes on all my thoughts.*
- 🎬 *I now know how to listen and make a choice.*
- 🎬 *It is only through studying that a person can change.*
- 🎬 *At first I didn't even know how to write my name. Now I know what I should do with my life!*
- 🎬 *I now know my own mind, and refuse to be tricked.*
- 🎬 *From now on, in everything that I do, I will stop first to think about it, and get information about whether it is a good or bad idea.*
- 🎬 *Studying woke me up, gave me knowledge, and improved my behavior and patience.*
- 🎬 *What has changed in my life is that now I have become a more humble and forgiving person.*

“I now dare work in a group.”

- 🎬 *Studying gave me the courage to stand in the middle of people and speak the truth.*
- 🎬 *What has changed in my life is that now I dare sit with the elders, something that I didn't dare to do before.*
- 🎬 *Whether the other person is old or young, a man or a woman, I now know how we can work together as equals.*
- 🎬 *Studying improved my social relationships.*

In other words, the skills of reading and writing are imbued with a deep transformational power. They are not just—or even primarily—tools for a utilitarian end.

ARED recently began an educational program in a village which had never had a single literacy class. The resident representative from the Ministry of Animal Husbandry made the following comments on how these activities had affected the village in just a few months. He remarked that:

- 🎬 *Before, every group (lineage, social group, family) acted in its own interest, tending to exclude others. But now, they are beginning to act in concertation around community needs. This is easily observable in the changes in behavior in village meetings.*
- 🎬 *Ever since this village was founded, women have never—not once—participated in a village meeting. Today, they come in large numbers and even speak out in order to give their opinion.*
- 🎬 *No one could ever work together because of political tensions and divisions. But they have finally decided to keep politics out of their work for the village. They have created an association named ‘Kawral’ (Unity), in order to work for the development of their community.*
- 🎬 *Everywhere you go, whether in households or in public places, you see individuals and small groups of people bent over their books, like a herder who is searching the ground for signs (tracks) of one of his lost animals.*

For those of us who design programs, books and curricula, we would be well advised to keep all these comments in mind. They indicate that people look at becoming literate as a process of personal and social transformation and change, not just as the acquisition of academic—or functional—skills.

4. The constraints that these classes face

Before we can measure the results obtained by individual participants, we should first evaluate the educational programs that we offer to them. There are several severe handicaps and limitations which are always part of the basic structure of all adult literacy programs, those being:

- 🎬 lack of time,
- 🎬 inadequate materials for the number of participants,
- 🎬 lack of books beyond the basic syllabus,
- 🎬 minimally trained teachers,
- 🎬 lack of a coherent curriculum,
- 🎬 inexplicit teaching methodologies,
- 🎬 inadequate preparation for teaching adults.

These factors are always present in some combination in every program. The miracle is that in spite of these odds against learning, most programs can nevertheless boast a surprising level of achievement.

4.1. Starting with time

In the 1999 study by Wiegelmann and Naumann of educational systems in Senegal, they found low test results in the national language programs they studied, and wrote: “The results of our testing of adults who have participated in a literacy class in national languages show the same tendency ... poor, even *very* poor, performance of new literates in reading, writing and math...”. However, they then go on to add a crucial piece of information—that this evaluation took place after only 150 hours of class time, and that *nevertheless* the results were “...comparable to the level of knowledge in French [school] for students after three years of study.” (Wiegelmann and Naumann, 1999, p. 23)

For reasons of comparison, if one calculates the number of hours a student has been in school after three years of study at six hours per day over nine months per year, we come to roughly 3240 hours. We all know that no school year actually completes anywhere near this number of hours for a multitude of

reasons. Nevertheless, curricula—and the accompanying achievement standards—are developed with a certain number of hours of study in mind, which in the formal school sector is counted in the thousands of hours. Many factors need to be taken into account before we can rightfully compare three years of study in French for children and one “year” of study in a maternal language for adults. However, one is forced to remark that the so-called “poor results” in the performance of the new literates in this study correlates with a very short investment of time (150 hours compared with 3240) in the learning process.

In general, the average literacy program works on the assumption that no more than a total of 300 hours will be invested in classroom study (see PAPF, 1997). Most literacy classes are based on a program of two to three classes per week, each class lasting two to three hours, over a five to six month period in a given year. If we multiply these numbers, we come up with a program that could take between 80 (absolute minimum) and 216 (absolute maximum) hours in the first “year” of study. Most programs aim for 150 hours of study per year. Compare this with the concept of a six-hour school day for nine months out of the year which gives a rough total of 1080 hours of class time.

Furthermore, most literacy programs are designed to continue for no more than two “years” (that is, between 160 to 432 hours) in total. In such a program, time for reflection, for integration of new knowledge, for repetition, for review, for application in real life situations, is extremely rare. The obvious conclusion we must draw is that we can’t compare apples and oranges. One “year” of study in a literacy program has little resemblance to one “year” of study in school. The question then becomes how can we best utilize this time, which manages to produce results in spite of its short duration. The concept of standards must change if one wants to measure results achieved after just a few hundred hours of class time, with less than six months to assimilate and apply this new knowledge.

4.2. The measure of success

Since time spent in class is reduced to an absolute minimum in most literacy programs, we must of necessity change the concept of what we are looking for by the end of that time. In our opinion, this style of education should be designed to provide the *key* to subsequent learning, so that newly empowered individuals can go on learning in real life situations after the classes have ended.

In this educational context, programs should try to encourage as many people as possible to learn how to keep on learning. In our experience, methods of evaluation can be based on a simple three- to five-point scale:

1. the highest numbers mean that the person has a good mastery of the skill or information being evaluated,
2. the middle numbers mean that he or she has demonstrated an understanding of the underlying mechanism (i.e., for breaking words into syllables, for doing division, etc.), but still hesitates or makes mistakes in actual application,
3. and the lowest numbers mean that he or she is still having difficulty with the concept or the mechanism itself, and therefore needs more (class?) time.

Unlike evaluations inspired by the formal school system that are based on subtracting points for the number of errors, the objective in adult education should not be to test for accuracy, but to see if the person has arrived at a skill level sufficient to make him or her an “independent” learner after class has ended. Since adult education tends to be a short and intensive investment of time, it is not appropriate to demand full mastery by the end of the class. Rather, we should search for signs that demonstrate that participants are able to continue learning on their own after the class has ended.

For example, at the end of each ARED training, we ask the participants to write us a letter to give us feedback on the training. We do not use the criterion of

“number of spelling errors” for grading them. We simply use the criterion of “can we read and understand what they want to say”. Obviously, we hope that over time people will improve their spelling. But correct spelling seems like an inappropriate criterion at the end of only 100 hours of literacy class, and where they have had limited access to written text of any sort.

4.3. Can the teachers read?

It is important to keep in mind that a very large number of people acting as literacy teachers today are barely or newly literate themselves; or at best, they have up to a high school level of French education, and perhaps one week of learning how to read in their own first language, as part of their training. In the case of Pulaar community classes, volunteers are often newly literate, being amongst the most enthusiastic to contribute to teaching others. We can think of several implications of this problem in recruiting qualified literacy teachers.

The first problem is that the vast majority of literacy teachers today have never owned a book in the language they are teaching in, beyond the initial primer. This includes those who have an education in French and who have had access to books in that language, but not in the national language. And in Pulaar, where so many teachers have never studied in French, this means that they have almost never seen or read a real text on any subject, in any quantity, of any quality, for any reason.

Secondly, if someone has first learned to read in Arabic or French, they read Pulaar with the same habit of breaking words into syllables in order to “sound out”, rather than reading for meaning. And if their first experience with reading has been in Arabic or Pulaar, they do not necessarily know what a sentence is, what the role of capital letters is, or how to interpret punctuation marks which would normally help them understand—and read—the text. Arabic does not use these writing conventions, and they also aren't common in a primer which is based on words and short sentences in isolation, not meaningful text. The vast

majority of new literacy teachers initially read without intonation, and ARED trainers generally provide the first example they've ever heard of a text read out loud in a meaningful fashion.

4.4. Training teachers for adults

We know by now that literacy programs operate with minimally trained teachers. Teachers are often recruited to salaried positions because they have the level of a high school student in French. They are then provided with roughly two weeks of intensive training on how to teach literacy classes for adult learners—as well as how to read and write in the language they will be teaching, if necessary. This is rarely enough time to change whatever ideas they have about teaching, which are based on their own personal experience as students in primary and secondary school, even though these experiences are totally aberrant for adult education. Although they all blossom under the participatory and learner-centered approach used in most trainings, many later fall back on the model of teaching with which they grew up.

In an evaluation we recently did, one of the first remarks that people made was to praise their literacy teachers—who, in this case, all happened to be newly literate members from the community itself. Amongst the most frequently cited attributes of the teachers were: 1) they were always on time, 2) they explained well enough and didn't hesitate to do it all over again if people didn't understand, 3) they often encouraged the participants, explaining to them why it is important to study, and 4) they never humiliated or embarrassed the participants. As one group said about their literacy teacher (who happened to be one of two women who had been trained along side of 96 men!):

We can't ask for more out of a literacy teacher. She is always well-behaved and polite. She repeats every time we don't understand, but never makes us feel ridiculous. She never humiliates us. She comes to every class exactly on time, and stays after to work with individuals who are having problems.

As trainers of teachers, we are in a continual battle against the mentality of the “Ceerno” (*master*). Even though almost all literacy teachers have the best of intentions, many can “turn off” their adult learners without being conscious of how important this vital respect is to them. In voluntary community classes, we often find that it is better to count on a teacher who has never been to school. Even though his or her academic level may not be the highest, they don’t have to unlearn as many inappropriate teaching techniques, and more rarely fall back on ridicule and humiliation in their manner of teaching.

Programs recruiting salaried literacy teachers inevitably chose the people with an education in French, whose handwriting is better and reading skills more fluent. But they might have made a trade-off in terms of behavior, availability, patience and enthusiasm.

4.5. Literacy without books

Most literacy programs operate without books. Radical as this statement may sound, it is a fact. “Without” might mean that there is an inadequate number of *copies* for the number of participants; or it may mean that there is an inadequate number of *titles* to draw from. In either case, we find that literacy classes today are fundamentally being taught as an *oral tradition*, not as part of a literate environment.

Beyond the straightforward quantitative deficiencies, there are also serious qualitative issues. Those few books which do exist tend to be of poor quality in both content and design, since there are very few national language editors to labor over texts in order to make them better, more readable, and more attractive, in which the design of the page supports the pedagogical approach of the book.

Nowhere do the inadequacies in teaching materials show up more clearly than in

the teaching of math. Most programs seem to rely on the principle that if you can *do* the operation, you can *teach* it. Therefore math books become simply a series of exercises with blanks to fill in. There is no explicit instruction on how to teach the operation. The four basic operations (addition, subtraction, multiplication and division) are each presented in just one or two lessons, assuming that if a person can divide four by two, they have mastered the operation.

Materials rarely teach a level of performance beyond what most people can already do in their heads. The question is not whether people can add (or subtract or multiply or divide) four and two; but rather, can they cope with adding 856,724 to 1,499,285—or subtracting or multiplying or dividing those numbers. Materials that teach people how to write down what they can already do are, indeed, a first step. But that is not enough, and the low results in math scores are, in our opinion, largely due to the fact that the materials are poor and teacher training does not address the issue of how to teach various operations in a clear, step-by-step fashion.

6. Conclusion

At the turn of the century, we are still just beginning to understand the rewards and values of adult education in African languages. At this time, there is a need to both better understand the motivations of the participants and the limitations of our programs, so that we can provide for better materials and teaching in future years when, hopefully, this force for democracy can fully play its role in society.

Bibliographie

Direction de l'Alphabétisation et de l'Education de Base (DAEB), 1995, *La Direction de l'Alphabétisation et de l'Education de Base: 25 ans d'expérience*, unpublished report, Dakar, Senegal.

_____, 1997, *Bilan 1996: L'Alphabétisation en chiffres*, unpublished report, Dakar, Senegal.

_____, 1999, *L'Education de Base non-formelle au Sénégal: Présentation, réalisations et perspectives*, unpublished report, Dakar, Senegal.

Fagerberg-Diallo, Sonja, 1997-a, "Constructive Interdependence : The Response of a Senegalese Community to the Question of Why Become Literate", forthcoming article.

_____ 1997-b, "Création d'un milieu lettré en langues nationales: L'exemple du pulaar au Sénégal", in *Développement et Coopération*, N° 1/97, Germany.

Faye, Alassane and Craig Naumann, 1999, "L'Education en crise: le cas du Sénégal", in *Développement et Coopération*, N° 2/99, Germany.

Humery, Marie-Eve, 1997, *Facteurs et Enjeux du développement écrit d'une langue africaine: Le cas du mouvement Pulaar au Sénégal (1960-96)*, Mémoire de DEA, Université Paris 1.

Ka, Fary, 1996, unpublished evaluation of a PIP (Projet Intégré de Podor) literacy program.

Kuenzi, Michelle, 1996, "Evaluation of Project #1653, ARED Adult Literacy (Phase 2)", unpublished evaluation, ARED, Dakar, Senegal.

Madden, Nora, 1990, "La Motivation dans l'Alphabétisation en Pulaar au Sénégal", unpublished study for ENDA-MSID, Dakar, Senegal.

Projet Alphabétisation Priorité Femmes (PAPF), 1997, *Manuel de Procédures Operateurs*, Ministère de l'Education Nationale, Dakar, Senegal.

Sylla, Yero, 1988, *Des Etats Généraux aux Classes Pilotes : Comment faciliter l'introduction des langues africaines au Sénégal*, UNESCO, Paris.

Tourneux, Henry and Y...
Ä√□ æifQ 5Rr□T | (iE cv? • i♦ ëRÖÿ - | i* Û®Δ < Gh î™ \$) '!
ç^Qó/ ' □Ç' //é6ÿZÿslré cJ "ñöK#", j1ç & FΔZ ° £Ä58ã°mζòCE8-jšãÄ "òQ
ΣÄj+4Æ@ü a<1 d□kÊKÄxéÖf | uçEû•@üáßam# '!áûd, 'Ö+|û! ?ÖÖ~xs;Û5iï • 8#
ç♦H?□Cç□™be √1μ"≠HJO 🍌 ~Úf<x-ōa÷%ßSè\$ñ%SŸ•Öe◊1øw:ãΔ- ©' ‡