

Training of Supervisors of Primary School Teacher Training Institutions and Quality of Basic Education in Niger: An Analysis of Problems, Motivation and Working Conditions

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Abstract

The study concerns the training of supervisors¹ of primary school teacher training institutions (ENI²) in Niger with a particular focus on profiles, working conditions, and motivation. It aims at determining in what ways these variables influence or affect teaching activities. The results show that the variables related to profile and bad working conditions determine motivation which in turn affects classroom teaching behaviours.

Introduction

Access and quality are the two main objectives on which the successive governments of Niger have focused their efforts since the independence of the country. Niger has inherited one of the weakest educational systems of the African continent (3.6% primary school gross enrolment rate at independence in 1960) and the country continues to face many challenges in this sector. Its economy has been strongly affected by the Structural Adjustment Program (SAP), currency devaluation and chronic droughts. This explains why the country has occupied the last rank on the UNDP Human Development Index (HDI).

However, the population has kept growing so fast that it has almost doubled in less than a quarter of a century, from 5 100 000 inhabitants in 1977 to 11 060 291 in 2001 according to the general population and housing census (Republic of Niger 2001). Over 80% of this population lives in rural area 63% live below the poverty line and still half is aged below 15 years. The number of school age children will have increase fourfold by 2050 (BCR 2005). The demand for education is therefore enormous. How can equity and quality education be effectively offered in such a context?

¹ In the present article we shall use indistinctly “supervisors” and “trainers” to refer to the same people in charge of training teachers in primary school teacher training institutions.

² Ecole Normale d’Instituteurs = primary school teacher training schools

The ten-year development program (PDDE 2003-2012) was initiated to answer this question and also to meet the worldwide commitments made by Niger in the educational sector (Jomtien 1990, Dakar 2000, etc.). The diagnostic studies carried out over the past few years highlighted many weaknesses in the indicators relating to completion rates, learners' scholastic achievements and teachers' initial training.

The completion rate at national level is low (40%) and characterized by geographical (rural /urban) and gender-related disparities: girls (31%) and boys (49%), (Republic of Niger 2006). Many studies which evaluated pupils' achievements (SEDEP 2000; World Bank 2005, etc.) found the performance of Niger pupils generally very poor.

- Academic performance: many studies including evaluation of knowledge reveal the following about Niger students' performance (SEDEP 2000; World Bank 2005, etc.):
- All the grades in written French indicate that they have a poor command of this language, and that they have a poor grasp of this subject; in addition, they demonstrated quite poor basic skills in math (SEDEP 2000);
- A study conducted by the World Bank (2005) almost came to the same conclusions: the performance of the students of Niger is below the average performance of those from the 18 CONFEMEN member countries (which includes a majority of African countries) in three (3) subjects: reading/writing, math and life skills;
- Initial training provided by teacher training schools is inadequate: training programs do not match with realities on the ground; poor educational environment; trainers lack the necessary skills to provide the quality initial training (PDDE 2003-2012).

Most of the work done on basic education has dealt with continuing education, school dropouts, disparities between girls and boys which are indeed relevant issues. However, there have been very few studies on supervisors of primary school teacher training institutions (ENI). Yet, to fully understand the failure of the educational system one needs to know more about the training of ENI supervisors. As a matter of fact, quality teaching goes hand in hand with the teachers' performance which in turn depends on the competence of the supervisors.

Initial training in these ENI suffers from a certain number of shortcomings among others, training programs not adapted to the realities on the field, poor pedagogical environment, lack of competence of the supervisors in view of the quality training targets set by PDDE (2003-2012) for pre-service training.

The article analyses the profiles, the motivation and the working conditions of supervisors in Primary school teachers' training schools. First, it shows the unsuitability of the supervisors' profiles, then it appraises the bad conditions in which they work. Finally it argues that the unsatisfactory performance of the supervisors results from their low motivation.

Objectives of the Study

General objective

The general objective of the study is to analyse profiles, motivation and working

conditions of supervisors of teacher training institutions and the impact of these factors on their performance.

Specific objectives

- To describe the types of profiles of supervisors in Teacher Training institutions
- To identify the degree of motivation of ENI trainers
- To analyse their working environments
- To analyse their classroom practices

Literature Review

According to Michel Develay (1996), “there is no doubt that all teachers teach to the best of their abilities. Yet it is obvious that some pupils have difficulties and that others fail completely, with all the consequences, sometimes dramatic, that such failure can engender”. Develay considers that “this is not a hopeless situation” and that “while the school as an institution cannot by itself heal all the wounds of society, better training of teachers may significantly decrease academic failure...” That does not mean however that academic content should be sacrificed or that our conception of the teaching profession should change to turn teachers into socio-cultural facilitators. On the contrary, the role of the teacher must be re-evaluated in the light of what he or she is assigned to teach, or, more precisely, what the pupil is supposed to learn. This, according to Michel Develay, is the real challenge today in the training of teachers. In order to achieve this kind of profile, teachers need quality training that prepares them to become competent professionals.

Altet, Perrenoud and Paquay (2003) state that training teachers consists in :

- starting from practice, encouraging, provoking, then following a voluntary change of a person in all his/her dimensions;
- helping to build competences and working to improve the mobilization and transfer of the resources;
- helping build models of complexity and to live with them;
- Not prescribing but favouring rather a well reasoned and informed choice in line with the mandate, personal project, expectations and constraints of the teaching profession;
- helping to build models for analysing complexity and ways of coping with it;
- inciting to formalize action and experience knowledge, and to connect them to knowledge gained through research.

Lastly, concerning professionalization, Lamy (2003) defines the following competences for a trainer:

- To manage the complex situations encountered, by evaluating quickly what is happening in the training situation in order to make appropriate decisions and build relevant strategies ;

To align the theoretical discourse that builds his/her frame of reference with the concrete situations imposed to him/her;

To create in the trainee a real project for appropriating the training he is undergoing ;

To reduce the gap between what is said and what is done in his own practices and in those of the teachers he is training ;

To provide support to trainees in a smooth, accepted and shared manner that respects them as persons;

To accept to confront his/her frame of reference with those of other trainers, thus acknowledging his/her own limits and weaknesses. Accepting that one is perfectible is an essential ingredient of any good professionalism.

To conclude this section related to training and the competences required of a teacher trainer, we retain the qualifications and qualities below cited by Maradan (2003, p.159).

a university degree (at least a BA) ;

a professional degree ;

the teacher's experience ;

a specialization useful for the mandate in the training institution.

Training institutions will have to select their trainers according to an evolutionary logic of inclusivity as indicated in Figure 1.

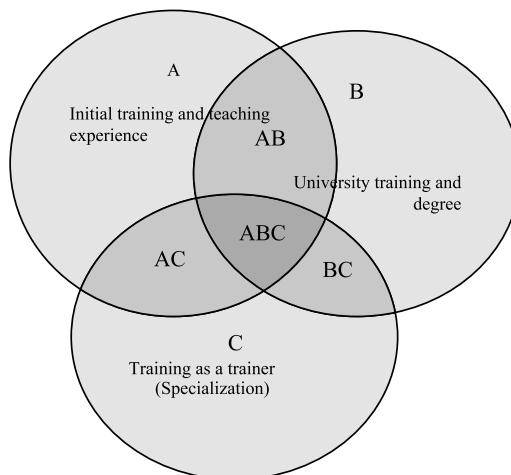


Figure 1. Three Types of Conditions in Order to Be Enrolled as a Trainer

The interest of this graph resides both in the intersections and the principal zones, for it seems obvious that prospective trainers must fulfil at least two conditions out of three, the third one will be developed during further training.

Our study will focus on this model to see if ENI trainers have the competences, qualifications and qualities mentioned above, and on the other hand check if the trainers present the professionalization characteristics mentioned by Lamy and Altet.

Analysis and Discussion of Results

The analysis below synthesises the answers to a questionnaire designed for ENI trainers and interviews carried out with ENI directors. These findings are enriched by the analysis of the focus groups interviews with teacher trainees and recorded lesson sequences.

Profiles

An analysis of Figure 2 shows that the majority of ENI trainers are permanent staff (with tenure) (77%) as against 23% contractual staff (without tenure), which may be conducive to a stronger commitment and a good performance of the teaching staff.

On the other hand, the observation that emerges from Figure 3 is the diversity of profiles. Lecturers holding bachelor degrees in various disciplines have generally not received any professional training. Primary school teachers carry out this work on the basis of their primary school teaching experience. What can be seen is that the majority of ENI trainers (55%) do not have the profiles required to teach in an ENI. Their initial training did not prepare them to be reflective practitioners capable of analysing their practices and transforming them into communicable professional knowledge. Consequently, this professionalisation deficit may affect their commitment and have negative consequences on their performance.

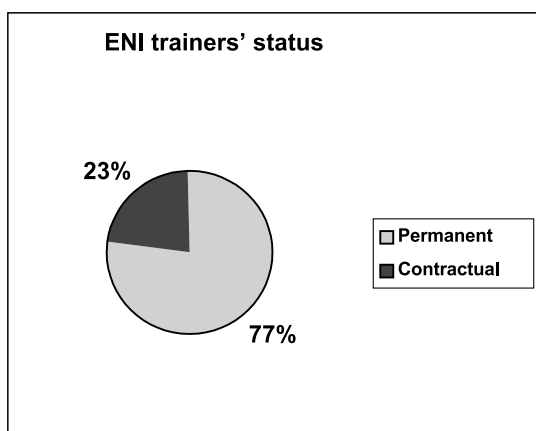


Figure 2. Distribution of the Trainers by Status

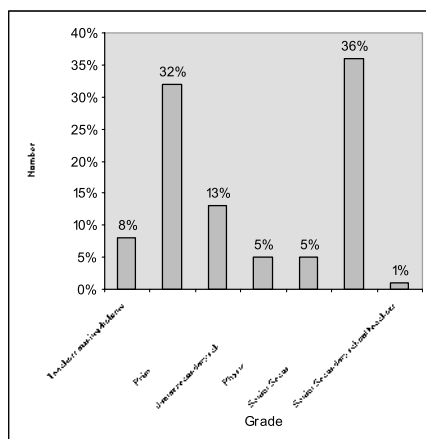


Figure 3. Trainers by Grades

The analysis of the opinions expressed by the teachers reinforces this impression. Indeed, the trainees state that “some subjects are taught by trainers without the right profiles (biology taught by a trainer with a BA in psychology, French by a lecturer holding a BA in sociology, etc). In addition the respondents find that the majority of the teacher trainers lack the competence to “align the theoretical discourse that builds their frames or reference with the concrete situations imposed to them” (Lamy 2003, p.47).

On the other hand the pedagogical advisors (CP) and the primary school inspectors (IEB) who represent respectively 32% and 13% of the ENI supervisors and who hold professional degrees are well appreciated by the teachers them “because they have received the appropriate professional training, they are open-minded, devoted and ready to answer to the trainees’ requests; they are sociable and never lose their tempers.”

According to these trainees “some ENI supervisors (inspectors and pedagogic advisors) are proud of what they are doing, even though some of them would have preferred to be elsewhere. They are dedicated, give good advice to the trainees, and feel at ease when they teach. In sum, they are professionals who incite the teacher trainees to do their job well. There has always been mutual respect between them and us.”

We can already draw the conclusion that some ENI supervisors do not have the qualifications and qualities mentioned by Maradan (2003).

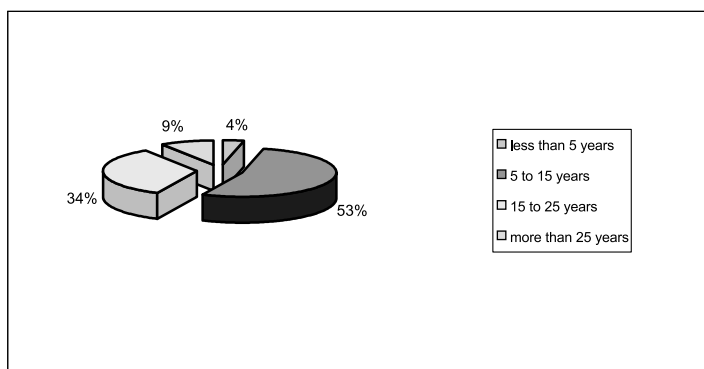


Figure 4. Teaching Experience

The analysis of the trainers’ teaching experience shows that 53% of them have more than 15 years of teaching experience (Figure 4). Some even have more than 25 years (9%). More than half of them have between 5 and 15 years of teaching practice. This number of years spent in the teaching profession would be a big advantage for ENI trainers

ENI trainers' working conditions

One of the main difficulties encountered by trainers relate to poor working conditions (40.74%) followed by teaching methods (31.48%) and lastly, mastery of course contents (19.44%) (Figure 5). The latter two problems result from lack of professionalism among trainers. Moreover the ENIs lack suitable working conditions and this is reflected in the crying scarcity of teaching materials.

Most respondents (96%) were unanimous in stating that the desired material conditions for quality training do not exist in the ENIs (Figure 6). The teaching environment is poor in most cases: shortage of teaching materials, absence of infrastructure such as micro-teaching rooms, libraries, laboratories and ICT facilities, lack of logistical resources for the dispatch and follow up of trainees in the field. These are compounded by overcrowding (70 trainees per class) in some ENIs (Dosso, Zinder), the lack of trainers in some disciplines, which leads in some cases (Zinder) to combining several classes, thus increasing overcrowding, or in other cases to reducing the number of class hours (Tillabéry).

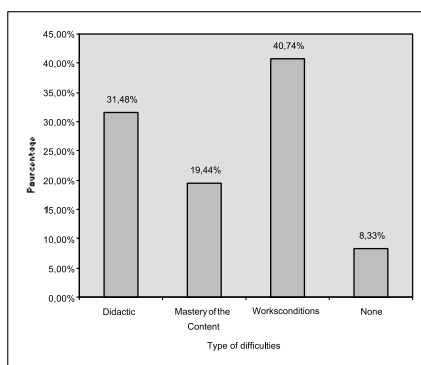


Figure 5. Difficulties Encountered

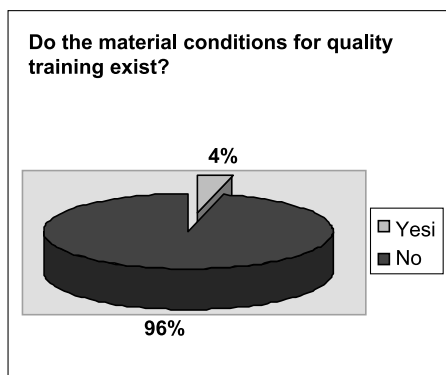


Figure 6. Availability of Teaching Materials

Trainee teachers complain about material conditions at two levels:

The absence shortage of teaching materials is a handicap for trainees in their research work as illustrated in the following statement: “Trainers give us research work to do, but we are unable to do it because we do not have enough books and when we manage to borrow documents we have little time to consult them. As a result, we produce bad assignments”³.

“We notice that even our trainers encounter difficulties in finding documents to prepare their lessons due to the shortage of teaching materials”⁴.

Concerning living conditions: ENIs are no longer boarding schools and students’ allowances are sometimes paid late, which leads to strikes, as some trainees explain

³ Interview with trainee teachers

⁴ idem

it: “If we are constantly on strike, it is because our allowances are not paid on time”.

Table 1. Summary of the Difficulties Encountered by ENIs

Problems encountered in the ENIs	DOSSO	MARADI	TAHOUA	TILLABERY	ZINDER
Shortage of teaching materials	X	X		X	X
Delays in the payment of teacher trainee’s allowances	X	X			X
Late start of classes at the beginning of the academic year		X			
Absence of State subsidies other than payment of staff salaries			X		
Shortage of trainers				X	X
Shortage of laboratories, libraries and computer materials for the administration; inadequate in-service training of trainers				X	

Motivation

Paradoxical as it may seem, 50 out of 82 tenured trainers (i.e. permanent staff) stated that they did not wish to teach at ENIs (Figures 7 and 8). Moreover, they are the most senior staff members (10 to 30 years in their posts). Teaching without motivation is the dilemma faced by trainers.

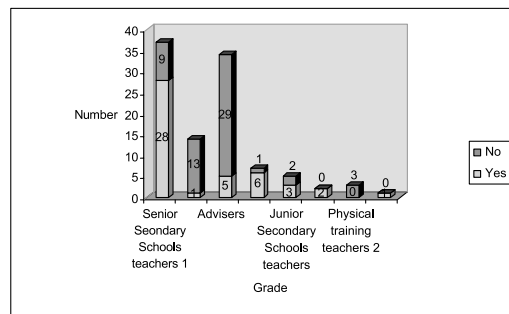
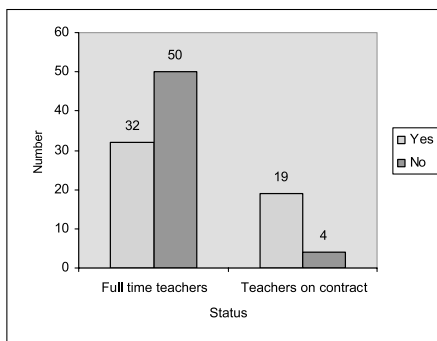


Figure 7. Motivation according to Status

Figure 8. Motivation according to Grade

This lack of motivation is explicitly perceived by teacher trainees, as in the following statements:

“Some of our trainers do not have any vocation for their job, they are teaching by obligation.”

“Our high school teachers are more motivated than our ENI trainers, for some of the latter do not create an enthusiastic climate in the classroom to motivate trainees.”

“Some trainers do not cater for our requests.”

An analysis of Figure 8 shows that a large number of basic education inspectors (13/14) do not wish to teach in the ENIs. As for teachers' advisers, 29 out of 34 do not wish to teach in the ENIs. This lack of motivation can be partially explained by the difficult working conditions and low wages as opposed to the advantages that their peer inspectors have in other positions.

After analysing the answers from the questionnaires, the interviews and focus groups we can draw the following provisional conclusions: there are two different types of profiles among ENI trainers:

1st type: trainers holding university degrees (BA or MA in sociology, psychology) to which we can add the experienced teachers and trainers falling under the category “others”. Despite their long teaching experience, they encounter many difficulties with teaching methods and mastery of subject contents. These difficulties are compounded by the poor material working conditions (absence of teaching materials, overcrowded classrooms).

The 2nd group made up of trainers with professional degrees obtained after two years of university studies. They are in general highly rated by teacher trainees. However they do not wish to make a career in the ENIs.

Trainers' classroom practices

The classroom observations were carried out according to Altet's (2007) views about “the professional instructor”, that is to say :

“a knowledge base linked to professional practice” – analysis of mastery of course contents ;

“ability to act in a complex situation, to adapt, to interact” – the teaching aspect ;
Grasp of overall educational objectives – education in social relations, citizenship, conflict management, etc.

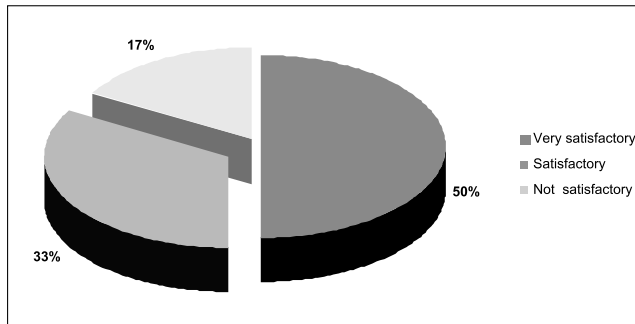


Figure 9. Ratings of Mastery of Course Content

This direct observation combined with a video recording produced the following findings (Figure 9):

50% of the trainers have mastered the educational content (highly satisfactory). The other 50% have disconcerting difficulties with regard to professional practice; The theoretical knowledge to be taught which the trainer should master to be able to teach has not been absorbed. Wrong or confused information is therefore passed on and the questions of learners are sometimes dodged.

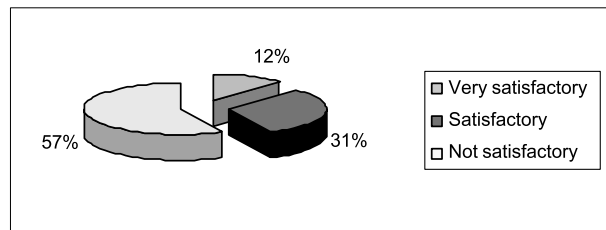


Figure 10. Rating of the Mastery of Didactic Aspects

There are enormous difficulties with teaching. This undoubtedly has to do with the profile of the trainers, most of whom are not professionals. The knowledge required for teaching is seriously lacking. Classes are conducted merely as lectures, using only chalk and talk approaches. The didactic aspect of teaching (i.e. the organization of activities, the management of interactions, the exploitation of various resources) leave much to be desired (Figure 10).

The general educational objectives are, on the whole, satisfactorily taken on board. The model of the trainer as a “social actor” is transmitted to the trainee teachers (punctuality, regular attendance, physical appearance).

Some of the teaching problems encountered have been linked to the trainers’ classroom behaviours. The presence (dynamism) in the classroom is barely satisfactory (40% of trainers)

and the quality of their expression (mastery of the language of instruction) are sometimes unsatisfactory (only 17% have what is considered to be a satisfactory command of the language).

This, again, is due to the lack of professionalism of most of the trainers who have entered the profession without any preparation. This is undoubtedly the reason for their lack of commitment. Gerard (2001) nevertheless asserts that “the first essential quality of any education system is to give pupils, students or other learners the desire to learn and to stimulate their commitment to the learning process”.

Conclusion

As a conclusion we can state that there are currently two types of trainers at the primary school teacher training institutions (ENI): The first group made of those with BA or MA degrees, primary school teachers and ‘others’, seem to face the most difficulties in carrying out their teaching duties. This category of trainers have not undergone any pedagogical training and they are therefore not well equipped or even prepared to hold a class. They know little or too little the contents of the courses they have to teach, in spite of their long teaching experience at the ENI. They hardly organise, manage and appraise their classroom activities. In addition to all these difficulties, they face other constraints such as the hard pedagogical environment that can influence the commitment and the quality of their teaching.

The second group of ENI trainers is made of the professionals presenting the required profile, more capable of delivering quality teaching in the ENI. Nevertheless, this category of trainers is less inclined, (or sometimes does not wish) to make a career in the ENI. They are pedagogical inspectors and advisors who normally assume management and monitoring duties in administrative offices under better working conditions. As a matter of fact, those who teach in the ENIs feel disadvantaged compared to their colleagues serving in the administration. This surely explains why they are not so motivated to serve as ENI trainers.

We are therefore facing a situation where : a) there are trainers without the suitable profile and wishing to work their way through and make a career as ENI trainers; b) Other trainers doing well and needing just a bit of retraining to get the perfect profiles of ENI trainers, but who do not wish to make a career as ENI trainers.

To solve this problem, the Government must consequently take a certain number of actions, amongst others, opening a program for training ENI supervisors at the teacher training college (ENS) of the Abdou Moumouni University of Niamey; retraining the already existing teacher trainers; establishing a specific professional body of ENI trainers; and providing some incentives to raise the level of motivation. In addition, the Government must grant auspicious conditions for quality training in order to avoid Niger falling into the situation described by Hannoun (1974):

Training and living conditions are intimately related. You can't demand miracles from a teacher while paying him a meagre salary. If teaching is to be done in a rudimentary way and under unattractive conditions the best won't commit themselves to teaching. This will contribute to making the system ineffective and generate high dropout rates.

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