

Relevance of deliberative democratic evaluation in secondary education in Gabon. The case of elementary school transformed into colleges

Louembet Onguele Christian

Ministry of Higher Education, Scientific Research, Technology Transfer, National Education, in charge of Civic Training, Libreville, Gabon

Abstract : The crisis of the Gabonese educational system is current. Efforts to overcome it are multiplying. From the Estates General of 1983 and 2010 to the recent Education Task Force of 2018, there is no shortage of proposals for achieving a quality Gabonese school. In this wake, we see deliberative democratic evaluation in Gabonese secondary education as an essential element in solving the problem. It is an information service for the whole community that is based on inclusion, dialogue, and deliberation. In Gabon's bureaucratized and hyper-centralized education system, the participation of all becomes an emergency in order to be competitive, efficient, and effective. An evaluation that takes into account the diversity of the school's actors is a guarantee of quality.

Keywords: Evaluation, democracy, teaching, education, school, Gabon

I. Introduction

The Gabonese education system was originally governed by Law 16/66 of August 9, 1966. Law 21/2011 of February 14, 2012, which currently guides it, repeals all previous provisions. It is statutorily composed of pre-primary, primary, general and technical secondary, vocational and higher education. Our study concerns general secondary education, in particular the First Cycle, still called Collège, which prepares students for the Brevet d'Enseignement du Premier Cycle exam.

Gabonese general secondary education is composed of two cycles. The first cycle (6ème, 5ème, 4ème and 3ème) ends with the Brevet d'Études du Premier Cycle (BEPC) and admission to the Seconde class. The second cycle (2nd, 1st and Terminale) is crowned by the Baccalaureate which opens the doors to the Universities. This second cycle includes :

- S and LE series (second year classes),
- A1, A2, B and S (Première classes) and
- A1, A2, B, C, and D (senior classes).

General secondary education is mainly provided by the public sector (the State), which enrolls more than half of the students. There are also private denominational (Catholic, Protestant, Christian Alliance) and secular schools.

Secondary education is characterized by an expansion of its numbers. If in 1968 there were 5503 students (Akoué, 2007), in 2017 there are approximately 435,984 of which 264,207 are public, or 60.60%. Except that this demographic explosion has not been followed by a coherent program of classroom construction. This has led to the emergence of the phenomenon of overcrowded classrooms, with nearly 100 students per class in large urban centers such as Libreville and Port-Gentil. The practice of double flow introduced since the 2016 school year continues. To respond to an "exponential demand for schooling from families," to use Nguema Endamne's words (2018, p. 81), the state is transforming elementary school into secondary schools. Unfortunately, there is a lack of specialized classrooms with inadequate learning facilities.

The latest reports from the United Nations Educational, Scientific and Cultural Organization (UNESCO) have shown that, more than sixty years after the declaration of the right to education for all (Karsenti, 2006), and despite many efforts, thousands of children in all four corners of the world do not have access to an "Education For All" after 2015. We are far from achieving this pious hope of the Jomtien conference in 1990. The issue of educational provision and the quality of learning remains a live one. It has important political, economic and social repercussions.

The Jomtien (1990) and Dakar (2000) conferences on schooling in Africa were faced with immense difficulties (Nguema Endamne, 2018). In Gabon, the educational offer is worrying. The prospect of academic justice among learners does not exist. The high demand in the sixth grade reflects a remarkable increase in the school-age population. The current investment is no longer sufficient. There is a strong imbalance between school supply and educational demand in recent years. Nguema Endamne (2011) refers to the perennial problem of insufficient school facilities, which demystifies Gabon's position in terms of schooling in the sub-region.

The paradox is the deficit between the resources mobilized by the public authorities and their inability to fill it with regard to the growing demand for secondary education. For the 2015-2016 school year alone, for example, more than eight thousand (8000) students were admitted in 6th grade in addition to the usual 30,000. In order to respond to this school explosion and maintain its sub-regional leadership in terms of mass enrollment "with gross enrollment rates approaching 150%" (Nguema Endamne, 2018, p. 26), the State has transformed some elementary school into Secondary Education Colleges. This is the case of the Écoles Pilote du Centre, Primaire de BATAVEA and du Parc in Port Gentil for the 2015-2016 school year (DGESN, 2015).

The objective is to "universalize access and promote equity," one of the ten Education For All (EFA) goals of the Jomtien Framework for Action (Nguema Endamne, 2018, p. 28). The priority is to address the inadequacy of reception structures to receive the exponential school demand. Unfortunately, this political choice to transform primary schools into secondary schools reflects the fact that public action in favor of education in Gabon has run out of steam. It is symptomatic of a State incapable of ensuring equitable access to quality education. Especially when we know that quality in education also rhymes with sufficient and satisfactory facilities. The temporary nature of these measures has not been effective. The 2016-2017 school year has seen other transformations according to Damas, Pleine Niger, Ens A and Akanda in Libreville.

Nguema Endamne (2011) mentioned economic and financial difficulties. The state is no longer able to invest more. It is no longer able to meet the requirements of quality education. Political and institutional conditions are at the root of the lack of classrooms. The opening of school to a larger number of children coincides with the end of the illusion of a "School For All". Supporting a school explosion and the efficiency of the education system do not necessarily rhyme (Nguema Endamne, 2018, p. 24). It is not because school is compulsory that it is efficient.

One can multiply reception structures. However, if the conditions for successful learning are not met, it is a red herring. There is increasing talk of "the decadence of public education" (Nguema Endamne, 2018, p. 127), of a generalized malaise in Gabonese schools despite the 1983 and 2010 Estates General (Nguema Endamne, 2011; Quentin De Mongaryas, 2012) and even the recent Task-Force on Education (2018). Assemblée Ella (2013) considers that the Gabonese school is searching. Deliberative democratic evaluation in secondary education remains for us an opportunity to find reference points for this school in crisis. But before doing so, it is important to present certain evaluation theories in order to better appreciate the relevance of our choice.

II. The abundance of evaluation theories

2.1 Enabling assessment

Enabling assessment originated in 1990 with David M. Fetterman, in his definition of the Objective-Based Approach (OBA) as a user-friendly tool that can be used in the context of an enabling assessment. In an annual address by the American Assessment Association (AAE) and published in the *Journal of Assessment Practice*, empowering assessment refers to the use of assessment concepts, techniques, and results to foster improvement and self-determination (Fetterman, 1966; 1997; 2001; 2005 cited by Bélanger, 2011). It seeks to take ownership of the development or improvement of individuals, programs or institutions. The architects of this approach identify two conditions for achieving development goals:

1) There must be empowerment of the community involved in the evaluation:

"A process by which individuals take charge of their environment (physical, economic, social, cultural, and psychological) using the resources available to them" (Zimmernan, 2000 in Fetterman, 2005, as cited by Bélanger, 2011);

2) Achievement of the developmental or improvement goal is made possible by the institutionalization and effective integration of the evaluative function.

Enabling evaluation is a highly collaborative approach. The participation of all stakeholders in all stages of the evaluation is necessary, in view of the interest in the subject of the evaluation and the commitment of all to the evaluation process. The evaluator thus appears as a facilitator, a companion. The decision-making power no longer belongs to an individual alone but to the group. The choice of this empowering approach is the result of a consensus. It should normally be the result of the deliberative reflections of the participants in the process.

In practice, an empowering evaluation does not require or recommend specific analytical methods or data collection tools. Rather, it is based on principles, theories, ideas, and values with clear steps (Zimmernan, 2000 in Fetterman, 2005 cited in Bélanger, 2011). At the end of the evaluation, discussions are held about the results obtained, which are to serve as a basis for interpretations in order to prepare the framework.

Simply put, the empowerment approach has three foundations:

- 1) Empowerment theory is based on the concept of empowerment.
- 2) Empowerment evaluation is considered to be self-regulation theory.
- 3) Empowerment assessment falls under action and utilization theories.

Like any theory, the empowerment approach is not exempt from criticism. Some authors do not find elements in its definition that distinguish it from other participatory approaches. Its characteristics have little discriminating power. Moreover, choosing this approach in times of crisis is less judicious. Let's try another theory: goal-directed evaluation.

2.2 Goal-Free Evaluation

Goal-free evaluation, also known as Goal-Free Evaluation or program-free evaluation, is not widely used in evaluation (Hobiola, Rabearivelo, and Jhane 2011). It can give the impression that it is a "cookie-cutter" approach or that it does not focus on program objectives. However, it assesses key aspects and impacts of the program and many other elements that may go unnoticed. While its principles are relatively straightforward, it has implications that may seem complex. The evaluator ignores the objectives of the policy being evaluated. He or she focuses only on the overall concrete effects of the program and not on what he or she is trying to do about the product itself and its impacts rather than the proposals or motivations associated with it.

The evaluator focuses more on how the needs of the sponsors are met and not on the statements of intent or proposals of the designers. At the center are the consumers or users and the effects of the evaluation program to make the evaluation and the program accessible. This is the case for consumers evaluating a consumer product. If car consumer associations, for example, successfully evaluate cars without first knowing the designers' intentions, why not apply this approach to programs? (Hobiola, Rabearivelo, & Jhane, 2011).

The theoretical approach to goal-free evaluation is in contrast to the approach based on program objectives, also known as goal-based evaluation. It seeks to determine whether the goals and objectives of the project are being met. It is much more performance-oriented. If the evaluator focuses only on the stated goals and objectives of a project, he or she risks missing the most important effects of the project. It allows the evaluator to guard against the biases of an evaluation based on program objectives. As such, it is a theoretically powerful device in evaluation practice. It allows evaluators to go beyond what designers generally claim to have, in terms of intent by stating stated objectives and by highlighting objectives not expressed by sponsors.

We note that evaluation free of objectives is integrated into a program improvement perspective with a proposal orientation to evaluate performance. Goal-Free Evaluation (GFE) therefore has its place upstream of programs, at the beginning or later in their implementation. Its methods are considered relatively flexible. Focusing on program effects, it allows for a variety of methods related to both deductive and inductive approaches.

However, the methods used in goal-directed evaluation are not well defined. Logically, they must meet a number of criteria to ensure that they cover all aspects of the policy being evaluated. Its practical modalities need to be studied in greater depth, particularly with regard to the explicit means. Hence our choice of deliberative democratic evaluation.

III. Relevance of deliberative democratic evaluation

3.1 An attempt at conceptual clarification

Democratic evaluation is a service of informing the whole community about the characteristics of a school program. The role of the evaluator is to seek to represent a range of interests in the formulation of issues. In this sense, democratic evaluation is very fertile. Indeed, it has the experience of having proposed answers to fundamental dilemmas in education, including power relations, stakeholder inclusion, and the need to produce useful and used information. Moreover, the legitimacy of the principles of inclusion, dialogue and deliberation is found in taking into account the needs of the most disadvantaged when making decisions about the distribution of social goods such as income, health and education services.

Thus, Democratic Deliberative Evaluation is in the wake of the major epistemological debate in both evaluation and social science. According to Théberg (2011), Deliberative Democratic Evaluation aims to reconcile evaluative theory with contemporary political philosophy. Its founders Ernest R. House and Kenneth R. Howe argue for three principles that they believe should underlie the institutions and policies of any democratic society. These include inclusion, dialogue and deliberation. This is the very heart of deliberative evaluation.

Inclusion is the principle that all evaluators agree on by far. It brings together all stakeholders with an interest in the program or policy. It is present in many participatory approaches. Therefore, in implementing Deliberative Democratic Evaluation, the evaluator has a duty to ensure that there is equality of power among the interest groups or stakeholders. If this equality is not ensured, the evaluator must put in place mechanisms to guarantee it.

With Deliberative Democratic Evaluation, the evaluator must pay special attention to the interests of participants that at first glance appear to be unnoticed. The evaluation must be the result of a dialogue that identifies the interests of the stakeholders. Dialogue must be paramount. It must also be inclusive and authentic in order to clearly articulate stakeholder interests. This is a step in the evaluation that is not always easy to achieve, usually because of the difficulty stakeholders have in determining their own interests. It is therefore necessary for the evaluator to engage in multiple stakeholder dialogues to identify the interests of all stakeholders.

In Deliberative Democratic Evaluation, the evaluator must establish a relationship of trust and respect among all stakeholders by avoiding communication difficulties. In this perspective, project participants from different social backgrounds must learn to work together within a regulatory framework to avoid tensions and misunderstandings. Deliberation, a cardinal principle in evaluation, is a cognitive process based on reason, evidence, and the principle of sound argumentation. If dialogue is the way to determine the real interests of the participants in the evaluation, deliberation is the opportunity to collectively assess the weight to be given to each interest in the common good. At this complex stage, controversy is inevitable.

To deliberate as objectively as possible, the evaluator has a responsibility to agree with the stakeholders to judge the moral strength of the interests related to the most legitimate needs. The evaluator must be neutral. He or she should not influence participants to go against their interests. On the contrary, he can convince them to look at the path that leads to the consideration of their interests. In sum, the principles of inclusion, dialogue, and deliberation interact in a Deliberative Democratic Evaluation. The quality of one determines the quality of the others.

But the success of Deliberative Democratic Evaluation does not exempt it from criticism. It has been criticized for its youth and for its limited use in the field by evaluators. The designers of this evaluation approach are also criticized for focusing on theory rather than practice. In the implementation of Deliberative Democratic Evaluation, the role of the evaluator is too important, even cumbersome. This can undermine his or her neutrality. Its success may depend on the field. Moreover, Deliberative Democratic Evaluation lacks a clear methodology that allows it to get closer to its objectives. Yet, despite these criticisms, Deliberative Democratic Evaluation opens up interesting avenues for evaluation. Overcoming the negotiation of individual interests may be one way to improve this evaluative approach. This is why we consider it to be relevant to the development of quality secondary education in Gabon.

3.2 Relevance of Democratic Deliberative Evaluation and Accountability in Gabonese Lower Secondary Education

Democratic Deliberative Assessment has proven its worth in some countries. In the United States, for example, a Democratic Deliberative Evaluation was conducted in 2005 on open enrollment policies that allow parents to freely choose their children's school rather than forcing them to stay in their neighborhood school. In the Gabonese context, admission to junior high school has always been the subject of debate for many years. The competition that for years determined the number of students who should be admitted to the sixth grade has been abolished. This is one of the resolutions of the Estates General of Education, Research and Training-Employment Adequacy of 17 and 18 May 2010 in Libreville. The experts concluded that it was irrelevant and unfair. However, the abolition of the sixth grade entrance exam and its replacement by the sixth grade orientation has unfortunately not solved the problem of the passage of the greatest number of students from the fifth grade of primary school to the sixth grade. Each time the results are published, some parents cry out in scandal. Their children have not been directed to the school of their choice. The State having unilaterally opted, in recent years, for the transformation of some elementary school into Secondary Schools.

Prior consultations of all stakeholders are not considered essential in the decision-making process. As a major consequence, at the beginning of each school year, parents of students are subject to all kinds of harassment in order to complete the registration of their children in secondary schools. At best, they try to bring their children closer to home by reorienting them, or they negotiate enrollment in schools they would have liked their children to attend. For principals, it's a different story. They are under pressure from all sides to find solutions to the many demands of politicians, administrators and even parents.

It is therefore appropriate to agree with Nguema Endamne (2018) when he writes: "Despite occasional assistance from the World Bank, the African Development Bank and various donors, the school crisis linked to the lack of structures has not been curbed" (p. 81). When the new school year begins, Gabonese schools are transformed into fairs, or even traffics of all kinds, which are indulged in or witnessed helplessly. This situation, which looks more like a do-it-yourself operation, perfectly illustrates the State's disengagement and its difficulties in providing schooling for all children. This is particularly the case for those who are oriented in the sixth grade so that they learn in the best conditions.

The orientation in the sixth grade poses a real problem of reception structures to receive the exponential school demand. The demand for education is greater than the supply of schools. There are recurring tensions between different groups with interests in school and from different socio-economic backgrounds. The

environment is no longer conducive to safe learning for all students: "The overcrowded enrollment, a consequence of the lack of public investment, exceeds normal ratios and no longer allows for quality education" (Nguema Endamne, 2018, p. 60). Interactions are no longer set in a regulatory framework. Despite some demagogic rhetoric, Gabonese schools remain mired in practices that only further tarnish their already poor image.

Parental choice of secondary school for their child at the beginning of the sixth grade remains a chimera, especially for families with modest incomes. The Gabonese government, under pressure from development partners and conditioned by donors, is struggling to play its role fully. The inadequacy or even the absence of clear rules in the orientation and transfer of students exposes the weakest to all sorts of abuses during the school year. Their chance of academic success becomes infinitesimal. Even their chance of social success remains at the project stage. This is the mortgaged human future.

Nguema Endamne (2018) opportunely quoting D'Aiglepierre is right: "Africa suffers from the absence of a framework for school supply and demand modalities" (p. 42). In the context of the transformation of elementary school into CES, all the actors in the education sector should normally be involved in the decision-making process in order to avoid all sorts of future recriminations. Thus, it seems to us that Deliberative Democratic Evaluation becomes inescapable in order to take into account all the various points of view about what should be done and ratified as a final decision. On the other hand, the door is closed to effective change in our various educational policies. As a result, Gabonese schools are stagnating. The quality so much sought after is not.

We must learn to make decisions together, in a collegial manner. For it is a question of our children's education, of mass and quality schooling for a bright academic and social future for all.

A decision such as the one to transform an elementary school into a junior high school should not be taken unilaterally, for example by a ministerial council or by any other political-administrative body. It must concern the entire educational community. By this we mean all those who are concerned with education: parents, teachers, students, education unions, non-governmental education organizations and any other partner in education. In fact, one should always take into account the principles that underlie and structure the Democratic Deliberative Evaluation for a timely and appropriate final decision. These include inclusion, dialogue, and deliberation.

In this regard, lip service to inclusion should no longer be tolerated. One should not include for the sake of numbers, when everything has already been done upstream by the politician or by the ministerial body in charge of education. One includes to work together, for common interests and to share a community educational ideal. The central administration must be neutral. It should not influence the participants in the exchanges between humanly equal individuals in the dialogue. The dialogue is precisely the opinions of each person taken into account during the deliberation. Each participant should find his or her account and recognize himself or herself in the final decision. This is the democratic spirit that makes the Deliberative Democratic Evaluation.

IV. Conclusion

Deciding what an elementary school will become a secondary school implies a prior consultation of all educational stakeholders. One does not decide alone for an orientation in the world of education. A relationship of trust and mutual respect must be established and maintained between all parties involved in the dialogue. Transforming an elementary school into a secondary school must be a collegial decision. Accountability must be learned. This is the Quebec principle of "accountability" or what Nguema Endamne (2018) refers to as "reddition des comptes" in his analysis of the relationship between capitalism and school.

References

A. Books

- [1]. De Mongaryas, R. F. Q. (2012). *L'école gabonaise en question. Quel système de pensée, pour quelle société?* Paris : L'Harmattan.
- [2]. Matari, H. et De Mongaryas, R. F. Q. (2011). *Ecole primaire et secondaire au Gabon: état des lieux.* Paris : Editions L'Harmattan.
- [3]. Nguema Endamne, G. (2011). *L'École pour échouer : une école en danger. Crise du système d'enseignement gabonais.* Paris : Éditions Publibook.
- [4]. Nguema Endamne, G. (2018). *La Nouvelle École Capitaliste en Afrique noire. De la marchandisation à la fin de l'école?* Paris : Éditions Jets d'encre.
- [5]. Vial, J. (1995). *Histoire de l'éducation.* Paris : PUF.

B. Articles

- [1]. Assembe Ella, C. P. (2013). La décentralisation : risques ou opportunités pour l'école gabonaise? Dans F. Allogho-Nkoghe (dir.), *Décentralisation et développement local au Gabon : Une mise en perspective.* Paris : Éditions Publibook.

- [2]. Théberge, T. (2011). L'évaluation démocratique délibérative. Dans P-M Daigneault (dir.) Les approches théoriques en évaluation. *Cahiers de la performance et de l'évaluation*, 4, 23-30.

C. Legal texts

- [1]. Loi 21/2011 du 14 février 2012 portant Orientation générale de l'Éducation, de la Formation et de la Recherche.
- [2]. Loi 16/66 du 9 août 1966 portant Organisation générale de l'Enseignement dans la République du Gabon.
- [3]. Décret 449/PR/MENESTFPRSCJS du 19 avril 2013 fixant les modalités de préparation, d'organisation et de délivrance du Brevet d'Études du Premier Cycle (BEPC).
- [4]. Décret 450/PR/MENESTFPRSCJS du 19 avril 2013 fixant les modalités de préparation, d'organisation et de délivrance du Baccalauréat (BAC.).

D. Rapport

- [1]. DGESN (2017). *Rapport de rentrée scolaire 2017-2018*. Libreville : MEN.