

Addressing the Early School Leaving Issue in Niger: An Improvement of Teachers' Status from Contract to Permanent

Amadou Boubacar

Sir Walter Murdoch School of Public Policy and International Affairs, Murdoch University, Perth, Western Australia

Email address:

amabz09@gmail.com

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Abstract: Education plays an important role in the socioeconomic development of a country. In many developing countries including Niger, education is placed as one of the key priorities of the government. The Renaissance Programme Act 2 made education mandatory and free for all Nigeriens until the age of sixteen and the authorities have created four ministries to manage and regulate the sector. Despite the importance given to education by the government, early school leaving remains an important issue as Niger has the highest rate in West Africa. This situation is expected to continue if rapid actions are not taken. Moreover, the issue is more pronounced in primary and secondary schools with an average rate of 37.15% between 2013 and 2017. Although the problem involves several actors, contract teachers have been considered to be the main driver of the education sector. Drawing on the path dependence and critical juncture of the Historical Institutionalism framework, this article examines the issue of early school leaving in Niger's education system. The model focuses only on teachers in primary and secondary school and explains how a change of their status (from contract to permanent teachers) may reduce the number of early schools leaving students. The study finds that, due to financial constraints, the government maintains the status quo rather than changing the status of contract teachers to permanent teachers. Furthermore, the paper shows the need for the government of Niger to focus on the two years training program for new teachers to be more equipped with adequate skills and competencies to deliver quality education to students and therefore maintain them in the education system. This study is of particular interest to policymakers in Sub Sahara African countries where contract teachers play a leading role in the education system to overcome the issue of early school leavers.

Keywords: Early School Leaving, Path Dependence, Critical Juncture, Historical Institutionalism, Contract Teachers

1. Introduction

Education is an important factor in the socioeconomic development of a country. Gylfason argues that "more and better education is a prerequisite for rapid economic development around the world [7]. Because of the vital role of education in stimulating economic growth and building the human capital, many developing countries place education on the top priority in their policy agenda.

Niger is an illustrative example at a point. Education and health are one of the main priorities of the government. According to the Renaissance Programme Act 2, education is free and compulsory for all Nigeriens until the age of 16 [23]. The government's commitment to education is expressed by

the creation of four different ministries to regulate the education sector.

Despite the importance given to education, the early school leaving in primary and secondary school remains a serious issue with an average rate of 37.15% from 2013 to 2017 [29]. This is the highest rate in the West Africa and this situation is likely to continue if urgent actions are not taken by the government.

Given the ability of the institutionalism framework to analyse rules and structures as well as to provide a sound and clear environment to identify policy problems and to discuss policy responses, the paper will be using this model to analyse the issue of early school leaving in Niger's education system and to come up with key solutions. Many actors

contribute to this issue but the model will only focus on the teachers and explain how a change in the rule (their status of contract) can reduce the number of early school leaving students.

In the first part of this paper, it will be presented a background of the institutionalism framework as a contributing model to the analysis of the growing number of drop out of students in primary and secondary school. The second part will analyse the issue of early school leaving using key characteristics (path dependence and critical juncture) of the framework. The third part will present the findings. In the last part, some recommendations will be provided.

2. Method

2.1. Background of the Institutionalism Approach

The institutionalism approach has the potential to identify the way in which individuals interact with the rules in use and how these incentivize or constrain their actions. It helps also in understanding how factors impact the possible outcomes. Therefore, the framework will be used to analyse the issue of the increasing number of early school leaving students in Niger's primary and secondary education.

Institutionalism is one of the non-linear theoretical frameworks used to analyse policy issues. There are two types of institutionalism including old institutionalism and new institutionalism.

According to the rational choice approach focusing more on rules, institutions are "aggregations of rules with members of the organizations or institutions agreeing to follow those rules in exchange for such benefits as they are able to derive from their membership within the structure" (Guy, 2012, 52). This model emphasizes the importance of rationalism, individualism and maximizing our life chances [8]. The author argues that the most important contribution of the rational choice theory to policy-makers is its ability to develop a predictive science to human behavior.

On the other hand, historical institutionalism is a model that analyses the impact of temporal processes and events on the origin and transformation of institutions that drive political and economic relations [6]. The authors state that it focuses empirically on how to better understand the origins, the evolution, and the consequences of humanly created institutions across time and place.

While all these varieties of institutionalism approaches have a diverse understanding of the concept of institutions, the definition proposed by Ostrom seems to be more generally accepted. She states that institutions are:

... rules used by individuals for determining who and what are included in decision situations, how information is structured, what actions can be taken and in what sequence, and how individual actions will be aggregated into collective decisions... all of which exist in a language shared by some community of individuals rather than as physical parts of some external environment. [12].

The merit of Ostrom's definition is to bring together three

key features of the institutionalism theory. These include the importance of rules, individuals as central actors and the bi-directional interaction between individuals and institutions.

Despite the revolution brought by the new institutionalism in studying, explaining, and understanding policy issues, it has been criticized firstly by American scholars even though the United States' social policies, economic policies, union politics and so forth, were the main focus of the early new institutionalists [13]. The author argued that "new institutionalism suffers from theoretical and conceptual confusion, lacks explanatory power, or simply represents nothing new in the discipline". Regarding the old institutionalism, Lecours added that it was criticized for being descriptive, a-theoretical and parochial [13]. Some criticisms are also made in educational research. In this regard, many authors argue that apart from the work of Rowan and Miskel, the application of institutionalism to the study of education has been scattered and diffused [27, 1]. These critics, instead of weakening the model, provide a distinctive contribution to the growing literature in this field and the use of the contemporary institutionalism in many disciplines.

Institutionalism framework has been used to address policy issues in many disciplines such as education, economics, sociology, political science, organization theory [18], politics of sustainable energy [14], and fiscal policy [10].

"Nordin, A. et al. used the Discursive Institutionalism (DI) to better understand and analyse the change in curriculum based on the 2011 Swedish curriculum reform (Lgr11) as an empirical reference [24]". In their analysis, the authors addressed three specific issues including the non-linearity of change, the processes of the translation of ideas, and actor agency. Using this approach, the author found that DI provides various possible (vertical and horizontal) approaches to examine curriculum change.

Another study carried out by Rambla addressed the issue of early school leaving in Spain using the Discursive Institutionalism [26]. The author came up with the conclusion that while the European Union, the Government of Spain and two other states used the same frame, their perceptions of the theory of change were different.

Menashy used sociological institutionalism as a theoretical framework to analyse the collective decision-making process within the Global Partnership for Education (GPE) regarding the issue of private education [17].

2.2. Early School Leaving Analysis in the Context of Niger

It is generally argued that education increases the productivity of the labour force and therefore improves the gross domestic product (GDP) of a country. In Niger, the early school leaving constitutes one of the intractable problems of the education sector.

Morrow (1987) defines the early school leaving as "any student previously enrolled in a school, who is no longer actively enrolled as indicated by 15 days of consecutive unexcused absences, who has not satisfied local standards of graduation, and for whom no formal request has been received

signifying enrolment in another educational institution".

This issue is more pronounced in primary and secondary schools. The number of out-of-school children of primary school age was about 1,265,101 on average between 2013 and 2017. At the same time, the number of repeaters in primary and secondary education was 81 698 and 96 111 children, respectively [29].

From 2011 to 2015, the government did many efforts to improve the sector. Four institutions in charge of education have been created. These include the Ministry of Primary School, the Ministry of Secondary School, the Ministry of High Education and Scientific Research, and the Ministry of Professional and Technical Education (Renaissance Programme Act 1 report 2015). Besides, 36 000 new contract teachers were recruited. The government built 15 154 classrooms and created four universities in four regions [23].

Although the government efforts to develop the sector, the total budget transferred to education was insignificant. On average, the education sector received only 4.93% (% of GDP) from the government budget from 2012 to 2017 [31].

Furthermore, the education sector involves many different actors at all levels. The stakeholders at the national and local levels include the government represented by the four ministries, the teachers (permanent and contract), the students, the parents, and the NGOs active in the education sector. At the transnational level, UNESCO, UNICEF, Global Partnership for Education (GPE), are the most representative partners [19].

Who should then be blamed for this increasing number of children leaving school early?

Given the diversity of stakeholders involved and the current implementation of the education policy (many ministries with less financial support, permanent and contract teachers), the study focuses only on one key actor (contractual teachers) to analyse the issue of early school leaving in Niger. These teachers constitute about 80 percent of the total teachers in primary education [19].

Using the Historical Institutionalism (HI) as a conceptual framework, the paper draws on the concept of path dependency and critical juncture to explain why the government maintains the status quo, while acknowledging the prominent role those contract teachers could play in reducing the number of young children leaving school by changing their status from contract to permanent teachers.

3. Early School Leaving Analysis Using the Historical Institutionalism Framework

As defined in the background section, HI is one of the three types of new institutionalism that aims to improve our understanding of the origins, the evolution, and the consequences of humanly created institutions across time and place [6]. In the HI framework, critical juncture and path dependence are the key pillars [4]. Collier (2007) defines a critical juncture as "a period of significant change, which

typically occurs in distinct ways in different countries and which is hypothesized to produce distinct legacies". It puts institutional arrangements on trajectories that are hard to alter (Pierson, 2007). The author argues that path dependence processes are originated by the critical juncture.

Mahoney argues that "a path - dependent historical process is where contingent events to a large extent determine the course of future historical events" [16]. In practice, a system is path dependent if the initial moves in one direction elicit further moves in that same direction [11].

The path dependence and critical juncture are also subject to critics. The critical juncture is accused to fail in four areas including the unit of analysis, the role of power asymmetries, the time horizons, and the near misses [4]. Raadschelder (1998) considered the path dependence as "a faddist label empty of any meaningful content".

Despite these critics, the two concepts are essential in explaining the Historical Institutionalism framework and they will be used in this study to analyse the issue of early school leaving in Niger. The focus will be on the primary and secondary schools which have the highest rate at 37.17% and 67.71% in primary and secondary schools respectively [29].

The issue of early school leaving involves different stakeholders and presents the two key features of the Historical Institutionalism approach. The first characteristic is path dependence. The teachers are key actors and play an important role in the education system. However, most of them are contract teachers. A change in their status may bring significant results in addressing this problem. The second dimension is the critical juncture characterised by the sudden reduction in the teacher's training program period from two years to only one year. Therefore, they have limited skills and pedagogy.

To analyse the issue of early school leaving in Niger, the framework assumes the following hypotheses:

1. *Hypothesis 1:* All contract teachers should have the status of permanent teachers, which gives them certainty and encourages them to work hard to reduce the number of school leavers (Changing the rule-Path dependence);
2. *Hypothesis 2:* The government should provide teachers a good training program so that they will deliver quality education to students (Radical change of the program-Critical juncture).

Government failure to achieve these goals will likely exacerbate the issue of the growing number of young children leaving school early.

4. Results

4.1. Path Dependence Results

According to the Ministry of Primary School [19], the total number of teachers was on average 60 757 in which 48 510 were contract teachers from 2012 to 2016. These contract teachers accounted for almost 80% of the total number of teachers in primary school.

In secondary school, the average total number of teachers

was about 12 981 from 2013 to 2017 and the number of contract teachers was 8 506 and represented 66% of the total teachers [20].

The above analysis of the context of teachers in primary and secondary schools highlights the weight of contract teachers in the system. They are key drivers of the education system in Niger. They are the first actors directly involved with students and they know exactly the weaknesses and strengths of their students. However, their status of contract teachers might impact negatively on their lives. This government rule in use, rather than incentivizing the actions of the contract teachers, could constrain them. Being on contract with the government does not guarantee them certainty, security, and sustainability in their jobs. The government uses its power and maintains the status quo. Therefore, this leads to path dependency. As Harty (2005) argues, "path dependence prevails in the case where only weak actors seek change, particularly those who are marginalized and do not have the means to achieve a consensus for change".

Changing the status of these key actors of the education system is hard for the government as it requires additional financial resources. Without this qualification, the contract teachers are uncertain and they are not motivated to improve this problem of early school leaving. This vicious circle between government, contract teachers, and the students is difficult to translate into a virtuous circle.

The government recognizes the negative impact of the status of the contract teachers on the student's academic outcomes. For example, a study conducted by the government in 2010 shown that schools with only contract teachers as personnel, obtained bad final results. Where the number of contract teachers was less than 50% of the personnel, the effect was positive [22]. One possible explanation of this situation is the job mobility of the contract teachers. They can break their contracts with the government at any time during the education cycle when they find a better job. Leaving students suddenly for a well-paid job may create a drop in the student's learning process and their level. Also, finding new teachers for replacement is often hard due to the low salary of the contract teachers in Niger. This situation can impact the student's level particularly when the contract teachers held a class for an exam.

Why does the government maintain the status quo while acknowledging the importance and the ability of the contract teachers to diminish the number of young people leaving early primary and secondary schools? How much does it cost the government to change this rule?

By changing the status of the contract teachers to permanent status, the approximately additional financial resources needed by the government are estimated as follows:

In the primary school (2016):

- 1) A contract teacher earns on average per month: 60,000 F CFA equivalents to AUD\$150 (at a rate of AUD1\$ = 400 F CFA, F CFA stands for the currency of Niger).
- 2) A permanent teacher earns on average per month:

100,000 F CFA equivalents to AUD\$250.

- 3) The gap between the two categories is: 40,000 F CFA equivalents to AUD\$100.
- 4) In 2016, the number of contract teachers was: 55,216 (statistics from Ministry of Primary School, 2016).
- 5) Additional resources needed approximately: 2.2 billion F CFA equivalents to AUD\$5.55 million.

Source: Author's analysis.

In the secondary school (2016):

- 1) A contract teacher earns on average per month: 90,000 F CFA equivalents to AUD\$225 (at a rate of AUD1\$ = 400 F CFA).
- 2) A permanent teacher earns on average per month: 125,000 F CFA equivalents to AUD\$312.5.
- 3) The gap between the two categories is: 35,000 F CFA equivalents to AUD\$87.5.
- 4) In 2016, the number of contract teachers was: 10,351 [20].
- 5) The additional resources needed approximately: 362.28 million F CFA equivalents to AUD\$905,712.5.

Source: Author's analysis.

The path dependence is likely to continue over time due to the current socioeconomic situation of Niger. The country lacks substantial resources to fill the gap between the two actors. Given the low salary and the uncertainty of their jobs, the contract teachers are often employed by private schools. A survey of the Ministry of Secondary School in 2010 found that 30% of the teachers in the private schools were the contract teachers in the public secondary school. As they are well-paid in private schools, they are likely to spend much time and deliver quality training proportionally of their payment. This situation is generally common to the secondary school contract teachers.

Although Niger's Gross Domestic Product (GDP) has progressed over the last decade at 5.4% annually on average [31], the country faces serious issues that deserved more attention to the government. These include the terrorist threats from the neighbouring countries (Nigeria, Mali, and Libya), climate change, and the drop in uranium prices [9]. With these extremely complicated issues on the government policy agenda, it would be difficult to transfer additional revenue from the state budget to the education sector to change the rule in use shortly.

In addition to the path dependence, the issue of the growing number of young children leaving school early has been aggravated by a critical juncture phenomenon in the 2000s.

4.2. Critical Juncture Results

The government created the status of contract teachers in 2003 (Décret 2003-234/PRN/MESS/RT/MEB1A/MFP/T du 26 Septembre 2003). This was officially established to improve the status of the contract teachers as they used to volunteer before this rule. To become a primary school teacher, candidates are required to do a test and follow a two-year training program. During the training program, the teachers will be equipped with adequate skills and knowledge

on how to perform well in their future careers. The training centres called "*Ecoles Normales d'Instituteurs* (ENI)" were located in five regions of the country including Zinder, Tahoua, Dosso, Tillabéri, and Maradi.

The government, after two years of implementation, suddenly changed the duration of the training program to only one year, rather than two years initially [30]. This change introduced a critical juncture, which continued until 2008. By the academic year 2008-2009 to date, the training program is two years.

This critical juncture was motivated by two reasons that pushed the government to introduce this radical change in the training program. On one hand, the education authorities have a crucial need of teachers in the primary school to meet the demand. On the other hand, the government aimed to increase the number of qualified teachers to supply both urban and rural areas [21].

The reduction of the training program was characterized by a high number of qualified teachers who graduated but with limited skills and knowledge. The Ministry of the National Education stated that only 2% of the teachers were not qualified [21]. How this change has affected the student's results?

A comparative analysis of the effects of the promotion from 2005 to 2010 (critical juncture) and the promotion from 2011 to 2016 (two years program) on the number of students out of school gives the following results.

Using data from UNESCO, it is seen that the number of out-of-school children of primary school was on average 1,302,008 from 2005-2010 and 1,233,393 from 2011-2016. These results highlight the detrimental effects of the critical juncture phenomenon on the number of early school leavers. It has contributed to leaving 68,615 young people from school in primary school. In other words, 68,615 young children would have been retained in school, if the training program would have not been changed. Those teachers who received the two years training program performed well in reducing the impact of early school leaving than those trained in one year.

5. Discussions and Key Suggestions

The path dependence and the critical juncture analysis highlight the impact of these phenomena in addressing the issue of early school leaving in primary and secondary schools in Niger. The government maintained the status quo due to the lack of adequate financial resources to change the status of contract teachers into permanent teachers in one hand. On the other hand, the government changed the training program of new teachers from two years to only one year. As a consequence, this led to aggravate the issue of early school leavers in Niger.

To resolve the issue of early school leaving in the primary and secondary schools, the paper suggests the government to:

- 1) Mobilize sufficient domestic revenues to change the status of the contract teachers into permanent teachers. This will give them certainty and motivation to deliver quality education to the students and therefore enhance

their academic results. The sound macroeconomic perspectives of the country, with the starting of the crude oil export project by 2022 [9], will provide the government with adequate revenues to do so.

- 2) Focus on the two years training program to equip the future teachers with enough skills and knowledge they need to understand the student's weaknesses and strengths and help them to succeed.
- 3) Look at what other jurisdictions have done to deal with this issue of early school leaving. While Niger has 1,265,101 early school leavers on average in primary school from 2013 to 2017, Senegal and Ivory Coast have 573,903 and 782,049 respectively in the same period [29].

6. Conclusion

Drawing on the Historical Institutionalism framework and using the concepts of path dependence and critical juncture, this study has brought two major results in analysing the issue of early school leaving in Niger. Firstly, the government, due to a lack of significant financial resources, maintains the status quo rather than changing the status of the contract teachers who are the key actors capable of improving the situation. The second result highlights the necessity for the government to emphasize on the two years training program which enables the teachers to acquire sufficient skills and competencies to deliver quality education to the students and therefore, prevent them from leaving school earlier.

While acknowledging the limitations of this study as it focuses only on one key actor (contract teachers), further research is necessary to strengthen the results of the analysis. In this regard, more focus might be given to the contribution of the student's parents and international organisations such as the Global Partnership for Education (GPE), UNESCO, and the World Bank in addressing this issue of early school leaving in Niger.

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