



# Politics of Language: The Struggle for Power in Schools in Mali and Burkina Faso

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# **POLITICS OF LANGUAGE: THE STRUGGLE FOR POWER IN SCHOOLS IN MALI AND BURKINA FASO**

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## **ABSTRACT**

Power can be equated to the possession of a particular language used to navigate the world. In Mali and Burkina Faso, two former colonies of France, language choice for instruction in mainstream primary schools remains a struggle between the powerful and the powerless. Fifty years after independence from France, both countries continue to recognize French as the official language and as the medium of instruction in primary schools. With low literacy rates and high dropout rates in both countries, attention must be given to the effects French language has on these two post-colonial societies. First-acquired language instruction has been shown to increase positive cultural identity, literacy rates, and community involvement in the schools. Yet communities continue to strive for French language aptitude in their children with the hope that this ability will provide social mobility. The reality is that 80% of children follow the occupations of their parents and become subsistence farmers (Lavoie, 2008). Experimental first acquired language schools are funded by the government, outside agencies, and other nations seeking to promote literacy in Mali and Burkina Faso. These schools have shown mixed results, as the citizens of the communities involved have serious concerns that their children will not be provided with the same education as children who attend the French language schools. Due to increased literacy rates associated with a community focused education, more research in experimental schools using first acquired language instruction is necessary to ascertain the factors that must be considered in providing literacy opportunities for children.

## **INTRODUCTION**

Fanon (1952) equated language to power, stating that “to speak a language is to take on a world, a culture” (p. 38). When colonizing forces from France took

over West Africa in the late 19th century, the dominant minority did not learn the language of the inhabitants of the land, but rather required the majority to reject their languages to learn the French language. Does this mean that the country's nationals became powerful by understanding the culture and language of the oppressor? Or did this requirement to learn a new language and culture strip West Africans of their identity? Power, in this sense, comes from gaining a voice in developing a nation, and it starts with the choice of language of instruction in schools. More than 50 years after independence from the French controllers, language continues to create barriers for the people of West Africa. Those in power possess French language abilities as opposed to the powerless, who maintain indigenous languages, thus reproducing the colonizer-colonized relationship in West African schools, community, media, markets and government affairs.

Two of these formerly colonized countries are Mali and Burkina Faso, landlocked nations bordering each other south of the Sahara desert. Burkina Faso was colonized by the French in 1919 and received its independence in 1960 (Lavoie, 2008). Mali was colonized in the late 19th century and then later received independence from France in 1960 (Bagayoko & Diawara, 2003). During its time of power over Mali and Burkina Faso, France established French as the language of choice across these countries by its use in government affairs, schools, media, and market life. Each country continues to maintain French as the "official language," while including several "national languages" to represent a small portion of the numerous ethnicities inhabiting these two nations (*World Factbook, 2009*).

One of the populations of interest in this region is the Mande group located in both countries. Bambara is the prominent language spoken by the Mande people who represent 80% of the inhabitants of Mali (*World Factbook, 2009*). Dialects of this language, Malinke, Dioula, or Maninka kan, are spoken widely across West Africa. Dioula is the dialect spoken in Burkina Faso and is recognized as a national language (*World Factbook, 2009*). With such a prominent percentage of people speaking this indigenous language in these two countries, it becomes important to increase understanding of the motivation behind their maintaining French as the official language rather than formally incorporating an indigenous language as the language of power.

Literacy rates for individuals over the age of 15 are 21.8% in Burkina Faso and 46.4% in Mali (*World Factbook, 2009*). This causes much concern that low literacy rates may be a direct result of the language of instruction used in the schools. Education expenditures for both nations are less than 5% of the Gross Domestic Product (*World Factbook, 2009*). Primary-school attendance rates are also low in these two countries, ranging from 33% to 45% (UNICEF, 2009). With French as the language of instruction in the schools of both nations, it is interesting to note that in francophone countries the "Ministry of Education statistics since 1965 show that 65% of sixth graders annually fail the achievement tests administered in French even though most of them have had six to eight years of instruction in the language" (Alidou, 2003, p. 108). How does language of

instruction translate into matriculation for West African students being taught primarily in French?

With geographic closeness, previous colonization by the French, habitation by the Bambara-speaking Mande people, low literacy rates, and low attendance rates in these two countries, a rationale for exploring language of instruction in the schools of Burkina Faso and Mali developed. With all of these similarities, it is possible that barriers to literacy in relation to language of instruction in the schools may be comparable. Although language of instruction is of concern in many nations throughout the world, this paper will address the tensions in francophone West Africa by addressing cultural identity, challenges facing current language of instruction used in the schools, challenges in implementing first acquired language of instruction, and economic struggles relating to first acquired language instruction in the schools.

### **BACKGROUND TO THE SYSTEM OF EDUCATION IN BURKINA FASO AND MALI**

As former colonies of France, Mali and Burkina Faso both adopt similar aspects of the French school system. This “francophone model assigns greater decision-making power to the central state educational institution, The Ministry of Education” (Garnier & Schafer, 2006, p. 155). Both countries follow the same testing procedures, requiring their students to take the *D'étude Fondamentale*, an exam administered in French, in order to move on to secondary education. Although both countries offer compulsory primary education with no formal fees attached, parents are required to pay informal fees to the headmasters and teachers and for books and supplies (Birdsall, 1996). Informal fees are sometimes used as a bribe to ensure that children remain in classrooms and have access to curricula. In two of the poorest countries in the world, requirements for parents or students to pay a fee for schooling may contribute to the high drop-out rate of children in primary school.

Burkina Faso has implemented numerous education reforms attempting to decentralize the education system and implement local languages in the schools (Maclure, 1994). These new community-based schools revealed high drop-out rates and few expectations for employment or social advancement for students (Lallou, 1998). These reforms have been unsuccessful and have been greatly tied to politicians' agendas. The dichotomy between choices for centralized schooling and decentralized schooling are central to the language of instruction debate. Decentralizing schools would place a focus on first acquired languages as opposed to French as the language of instruction in the schools, providing opportunities for “young adults who have not been able to succeed in the formal school system because it uses a language in which they are not fluent” (Trudell, 2009, p. 77). Decentralization of the schools in Burkina Faso would provide schools focused on the needs of individual communities and cater to the recognition of national

languages in Burkina Faso.

Mali follows the French model using a centralized school system with French as the language of instruction. There are numerous “experimental” schools throughout the nation using Bambara as the language of instruction, yet there is little research on the effectiveness of these schools (Ginsburg, Adams, Clayton, Mantilla, Sylvester, & Wang, 2000). Rural areas are often the target for these experimental schools, and the migratory patterns of rural families do not allow for much conclusion on the effectiveness of local language instruction. School systems must also recognize the loss of cultural identity through the loss of local language instruction in the schools.

### **LOSS OF CULTURAL IDENTITY THROUGH LANGUAGE**

Fanon asserts, “To speak means to be in a position to use a certain syntax, to grasp the morphology of this or that language, but it means above all to assume a culture, to support the weight of a civilization” (Fanon, 1952, pp. 17-18). Language provides an entrance into a culture, a window from which to view the world. What does this mean for the post-colonial nations? Do they adopt the language and culture of the colonizer or return to the language of their ancestors? Burkina Faso and Mali both uphold French as the official language, and both countries continue to support French as the language of instruction in the schools as an avenue through which to provide access to the developing world. This is largely due to the “specific type of colonization implemented in the French Empire... based on the principle of assimilation” (Renou, 2002, p. 8). In reality, French is only sparsely recognizable as an official language in either of the countries. Mali’s population is “about 80% rural and consists of 15 major ethnic groups” (Ouane, 1994, cited in Ginsburg et al., 2000, p. 36); 80% of that population speaks Bambara (World Factbook, 2009). In Burkina Faso, there are 59 spoken languages with 48% of the population speaking Mòorè (Lavoie, 2008). With fewer than 15% of the population of Burkina Faso speaking French on a daily basis (Lavoie, 2008), and the maintenance of numerous local languages, it appears that both Malians and Burkinabe still equate cultural identity with the manifestation of language.

Expression of first acquired languages in a post-colonial society may come with repercussions of painful memories of oppression by the French colonizers on older generations. French colonialists were assimilationists, imposing the French language on the population in both Burkina Faso and Mali by way of schooling (Lavoie, 2008). In Burkina Faso, “French colonialists used the symbolic punishment of tying a wooden stick, dry monkey head, or seashell around the neck of students who were caught talking in their mother tongue to reinforce French language ‘superiority’” (Lavoie, 2008, p. 662). The implication that speaking in the first acquired language is somehow linked to the past, to the heritage of an

“uncivilized” nation, may cause older generations to idealize speaking the French language in an effort to encourage their children to adopt a more “modern” Eurocentric or Western belief system. A perception persists that maintaining cultural beliefs and practices by speaking first acquired languages somehow makes one “inferior” through inability to participate in the Western world. It is difficult for those with this belief system to have a positive view of their own language. Colonial schooling and the after-effect of that model have provided “an education that has for the most part failed to deeply cultivate self-esteem and pride in peoples of African descent” (Dei, 2008, p. 231). Practices in the schools promoting the supremacy of France have led to beliefs of inferiority in the use of first acquired languages in formal schooling. This remains evident almost fifty years after independence through the encouragement of French language instruction in the schools by the formerly colonized generations and their descendants.

### POST-COLONIAL “NATIONALISM”

Colonization of West Africa formed new national boundaries, creating nations of multiple languages and cultures. In order to provide national unity, it became important for both Mali and Burkina Faso to invoke a sense of *national* unity as opposed to the previous *cultural* unity through using a common language. Through promotion of French as the official language, these countries attempted to create a cohesive society inclusive of all cultures. Burkina Faso eventually included Dioula, Fulfulde, and Mòorè as national languages. This caused much disappointment to other “populations who protested this ‘injustice’” (Lallou, 1998, p. 1). By legally recognizing three languages and cultures but excluding the 55 or more other languages and cultures, definitive power structures have been put into place. This sends a particular message to populations not included in this recognition that not only is their culture somehow inferior to French culture, but now there are three other African cultures who have received accolades from the federal government to become national languages. A similar phenomenon occurred in Mali with the use of Bambara as a national language. Bambara is evident on street signs and in the media and is spoken by 80% of the population (*World Factbook*, 2009). This leaves out the Tuaregs, Songhai, Senufo, and Bobo. What has this done to the cultural identity of these people? The power of language has demoralized and perpetuated inferiorities made evident during colonization among the different cultural groups in Mali and Burkina Faso. Unquestionably, without the maintenance of the first acquired language, traditional practices have been lost, as new generations lose the ability to speak in the tongue of their ancestors.

Language policy has kept agrarian societies of Mali and Burkina Faso from competing fully in the global market. The cultural identity of farmers has been devalued through the maintenance of indigenous languages. As the African elites, including members of government, move toward a Western value system, the dichotomies between rural and urban, French and first-acquired language, and de-

veloped and developing nations begin to impose a breakdown of *value* placed on these traditional societies still maintaining first-acquired language practices within their society. Fanon (1952) describes the aftermath of colonization best as he explains that “every people in whose soul an inferiority complex has been created by the death and burial of its local cultural originality—finds itself face to face with the language of the civilizing nation” (p. 18). Malians and Burkinabe are forced to address the power language holds daily as they make choices about education for their children, participate in local government, expose themselves to the media, and partake in the globalization of their economies. As stakeholders make language decisions based on supposed future opportunities through the use of French, the challenges in learning a second language as a first language may be too great to achieve any real future prospects for students.

### **CHALLENGES REGARDING FRENCH LANGUAGE INSTRUCTION**

Brock-Utne argues, “The choice of a language of instruction in Africa is a political choice, a choice that may redistribute power in a global context as well as within an African country, between the elites and the masses” (Brock-Utne, 2001, p. 118). French is the official language in both Mali and Burkina Faso and the official language used to teach in mainstream primary schools: “Mainstream primary schools in francophone Africa are mere copies of colonial schools” (Alidou, 2003, p. 107). Simple changes from French names to African names used in textbooks were implemented, yet there has been “no fundamental change in language or teaching methods since the colonial era” (Alidou, 2003, p. 107). Poor rural areas have lower academic success than do their middle- and upper-class urban counterparts due in large part to the language of instruction used in the schools: “The dichotomy of urban and rural contrasts had its genesis, and power became related to institutional knowledge” (Lavoie, 2008, p. 663). Any prospects of higher education require students to pass a national exam administered in French. Middle- and upper-class students often come from homes where the dominant language is French and have access to that cultural capital before entering the classroom (Alidou, 2003). This previous knowledge of French contributes to the social class division where one class has access to curricula and another does not. The children of middle- and upper-class families are more likely to pass their exams and have the ability to move into higher educational opportunities due to their exposure to French, and thus obtain more cultural capital, affording them a place in the global society. This separation between classes through the power of language encourages Malian and Burkinabe scholars and elites to maintain their dominance by promoting French as the language of instruction in the schools.

Monolingual schools, with French as the language of instruction, are designed to train administrative workers, yet more than 80% of the populations in Mali and Burkina Faso live by subsistence farming (Lavoie, 2008). This type of

schooling, therefore, caters to the elite by providing professional opportunities for their children, while leaving the rural poor not only illiterate in their first acquired language, but also in the official language of the country. A parent who is a subsistence farmer might encourage a French-only school in the hopes that his or her child might be trained to move into administrative work, not recognizing that the chances of that child entering that type of work is less than 20% (Lavoie, 2008). If it can be agreed upon that “learning to read in the language which one already speaks is a qualitatively better learning experience than is learning to read in a language one is not familiar with” (Alidou et al., 2006; Dutcher, 2004; UNESCO, 2005, cited in Trudell & Schroeder, 2007, p. 165), then why do schools in these countries continue to use French as the language of instruction? Perhaps the possibility of transforming “imperial languages from instruments of domination to instruments of liberation” (Mazrui, 2003, p. 101) is in the minds of parents as they support and send their children to monolingual schools.

Fanon’s statement that “mastery of language affords remarkable power” (1952, p. 18) provides an explanation for the desire of parents to provide their children with French instruction in hopes of providing the powerless with the prospect to obtain some of that power. Knowledge of the French language can allow for social and physical mobility for the students being immersed in the language. These students may have opportunities to partake in reading literature, communicating with peers internationally, understanding information transmitted through national and international media, and participating fully in government activities. The rationale for maintaining French as the language of instruction in the schools on the part of the local inhabitants of Mali and Burkina Faso appears to be one of providing social mobility for the next generation while also assuring continued economic support for education.

### **ECONOMIC TIES TO FRANCE**

Economics is another motivating factor for the families in these two countries to support the language of the former colonizer. When it comes to financial support for the schools, “France remains the main advocate for francophone African countries at the World Bank” (Alidou, 2003, p. 113). If curricula and materials are supported by France, a country with numerous resources, removing that education foundation may result in fewer schools and thus fewer opportunities for the poor: “Local community members are well aware of the social and economic implications of language choice in their children’s education” (Trudell, 2007, p. 553). Rejecting the French language, and the aid which accompanies it, will affect numerous other areas of development: “Aid to education affects not only learners and schools now but also the health of society and the quality of life for many years to come” (Samoff, 2004, p. 398). Malians and Burkinabe are conscious of the importance of schooling and the effects it has on future development in other areas and the reliance on aid to provide that education to their children.



It is estimated that “aid from France represents a fairly constant percentage of between 25 percent and 27 percent of total aid received by Burkina Faso” (Gabas, Faure & Sindzingre, 1997, p. 48). France makes up slightly less of Mali’s total reception of aid at about 18% (Brigaldino, 1997). Such statistics highlight “France’s ‘special’ relationship with its former black colonies—a relationship based on a many-sided framework called *La Francophonie*” (Renou, 2002, p. 5), a relationship that still has great influence over these two nations: “Underlying the concept of *La Francophonie* was the promotion of French culture and language” (Renou, 2002, p. 6). French culture is now embedded in the fabric of Malian and Burkinabe societies and is further promoted through French language instruction in the schools. Mali and Burkina Faso both rely heavily on the aid from France to fund many development projects, including primary education. France would like to “remain influential on the African content” (Renou, 2002, p. 6) and is able to do so by maintaining an aid relationship with Mali and Burkina Faso, thus preserving the dependence of these two nations on their former colonizer.

Another source of funding comes from Malians and Burkinabe living and working internationally, both legally and illegally. French language ability provides social and physical mobility by providing Malians and Burkinabe with prospects to cross borders and oceans in an attempt to locate gainful employment. Remittances from those nationals working in other countries help to “support infrastructure development and social services, including health clinics, schools, and roads” (Martin, Martin & Weil, 2002, p. 97). As a result, it becomes particularly important for families to encourage French language learning in the schools with the intention of providing their children with future opportunities for employment worldwide. Mali and Burkina Faso are bordered by seven other French-speaking nations, allowing for numerous opportunities to cross into other wealthier nations for employment purposes.

An added difficulty tied to economics is in the business of publishing and media. The language of publishing is French, and consequently it is the educational policy encouraging French as the language of instruction in schools that continues to allow French publishers to receive financial gain while stripping the locals of their native language (Brock-Utne, 2001). Educational publishing dominates the market: “Textbooks are of crucial importance for the publishing and printing industry in Africa, as they represent 90% or more of the total book market in Africa” (Takala, 1995, cited in Brock-Utne, 2001, p. 121). France continues to maintain its role as the colonizer of West Africa via economic power in regards to the language of instruction used in the schools through publishing the textbooks and other literature. To make the transition to African languages in mainstream school settings, who will provide the financial support to create new textbooks, train new teachers, and create new literary canons? It is costly to implement a language policy including African languages as languages of formal instruction, and without the support of France, it may be impossible (Brock-Utne, 2001). Yet, the cost must be looked at not only in terms of financial cost, but “what it costs

to continue with a language policy where the language of instruction becomes a barrier to knowledge for millions of African children” (Brock-Utne, 2001, p. 118). It seems that local language of instruction would provide the likeliest situation for students to become literate, yet there are multiple obstacles in moving local language instruction from theory to practice.

### **IMPLEMENTING FIRST ACQUIRED LANGUAGE INSTRUCTION**

Research conducted in Mali “evidenced limited French language literacy among Malian children” (Ginsburg et al., 2000, p. 37). Low rates of secondary school attendance—less than 17% for both Burkina Faso and Mali (UNICEF, 2009)—allow for some explanation of the low literacy rates in these two nations. Can language of instruction be attributed to the low literacy skills and low matriculation for children of these countries? According to UNICEF (2009), Mali and Burkina Faso are recognized with ratings of 6 and 7 respectively as the least-developed nations in the world. Education has proven to be a major factor in developing a nation, yet without the appropriate language of instruction in the schools, literacy rates will remain stagnant.

In order to effectively put into practice first-acquired language education in post-colonial societies, appreciating the attitudes and beliefs of the parents, teachers, and other stakeholders during a transition of school systems from French language of instruction to first acquired language of instruction must be attempted: “An understanding of these attitudes is particularly crucial to any attempt to implement language policy that favours the use of local languages in education” (Trudell, 2007, p. 553). There is a “widespread belief that embracing colonial languages is the surest way to economic and social progress” (Adegbija, 1994, cited in Trudell, 2006, p. 197). Older generations in these two countries carry with them the recollection of colonization and the obvious exclusion from political and social realms of society in direct reference to the lack of possession of cultural capital through language. These older generations do not want their children to feel the same sort of segregation through language ability that they once felt; therefore, listening to their stories and approaching language of instruction from a place of understanding is crucial.

### **FURTHER MARGINALIZATION**

In searching for cultural identity, first acquired language creates a context “where its community members are able to find a space for their own values among other local language communities” (Holmes, 2008, p. 367). First acquired language instruction allows the children of marginalized populations to carry on the generational traditions through language. In 1974, Burkina Faso completely overhauled the education system by creating national reforms to include first-

acquired languages as the medium of instruction in the schools (Lallou, 1998). Based on colonial stigmas surrounding language, “Burkinabe saw no interest in sending their children to school to learn a language that they already spoke at home” (Lallou, 1998, p. 2). Due to this extreme rejection of the first-acquired language school system, most of the schools began to cater to the most underprivileged students resulting in a drop-out rate of 60% (Lallou, 1998). Top-down efforts are less likely to succeed: “It is recognized that successful initiatives for combating linguistic and cultural marginalization must be grounded in the indigenous community itself” (Trudell, 2006, p. 196). Without the support and backing of the communities, mother tongue education is not going to be a viable option to combat low literacy rates in Burkina Faso. Bilingual schools continued to crop up in Burkina Faso started by or with the assistance of foreign aid and community involvement (Lavoie, 2008). Lacking collaboration with the community, the formation of a bilingual school is nearly unachievable.

### INTERNATIONAL INITIATIVES

One of the factors causing community members to reject first acquired language instruction in the schools is “the international move to decentralize national school systems” (Muskin, 1999, p. 39) and the mistrust in relation to the motives of the proponents supporting this educational reform. First acquired language instruction can be seen as a vehicle “for the *transmission* of Western values and technologies” (Stroud, 2003, p. 24). Those in power implementing first-acquired language education in the school setting are often outsiders, foreigners with agendas. Some are anthropologists trying to preserve a language and use primary schools to do so. Others are using local language schools as an “experiment” in literacy and language acquisition. Until an “indigenous, gendered, and rightful owner” (Stroud, 2003, p. 24) becomes the one putting into practice first-acquired language education, it may be unfeasible to gain nationwide sponsorship of bilingual or first acquired language schools. Considering the demise of the mother tongue language schools in Burkina Faso as a result of high drop-out rates, it’s not surprising that parents are reluctant to support a local language school in their community.

A “government backed initiative called *pedagogie convergent* (convergent pedagogy), an alternative primary school curriculum which combines local language use with interactive teaching methods” (Alidou, 2003, p. 106, cited in Trudell, 2007, p. 556) was met with some resistance in Mali. A major concern was that lacking a grasp of the French language would limit future prospects for Malian children to have a place in the francophone world (Trudell, 2007). There is also concern in Malian communities that a child who is not successful in school may become damaged for participation in the agrarian society (Carlson, 2004, cited in Trudell, 2007). If a child attends school but does not possess the language required to move outside of the farming industry, some Malians feel that

the years spent away from the farm during childhood to attend school creates a lack of discipline for the agrarian lifestyle. Without knowledge of the benefits of literacy regardless of language spoken, these communities will continue to push for the French language to be used as the language of instruction in the schools.

### ORAL TO WRITTEN

Disagreements on implementation, concerns about future employment opportunities and skepticism regarding the importance of local language literacy have all contributed to lack of support for promoting local languages in the schools. A major concern in the implementation of local language schools is the proper development of a written language. Most languages in both Burkina Faso and Mali were passed down orally and therefore lack written grammars, manuals or language instruction guides. Many of the ethnicities in both Burkina Faso and Mali communicate in languages that were transcribed by foreigners serving as missionaries, developers and colonizers. The lack of ownership of the language leaves some concerned with the authenticity of the written word.

In the case of the Mande people, issues surrounding the *correct* translations of the oral language to written language as well as issues of identity and defining who really can be considered a part of the Mande people. Mother tongue literacy in Bambara, Dioula, or Malinke (all Mande languages) became available as a phonetic transcription of the oral language into a Latin alphabet. There have been many variations of this Latin transcription, as evidenced by the changing alphabet in textbooks and religious literature. In 1949, Souleymane Kante from Guinea, developed the N'Ko [I say] alphabet using a mixture of Arabic and Latin characters and following the Arabic tradition of reading from right to left (Clemons & Yerende, 2009). These distinctions among the "real" written language have caused issues of identity among the Mande people.

Although the N'ko language was created in a fashion to unite Mande speakers in more than ten West African nations, the hierarchies established between dialects has actually served to divide people (Amselle, 1997). The creator of this language hails from Guinea; hence those who refer to themselves as Malinke and speak Maninkakan, the dialect of Bambara spoken in Guinea and southwestern Mali, believe that their dialect is the only correct form (Amselle, 1997). "This exclusive legitimacy accorded to Malinke is accompanied by a correlative devaluation of Bambara which is considered only a bastardized version of the 'mother language'" (Amselle, 1997, p. 44). The elitism surrounding written language choice has divided Mande groups rather than unite them as was the purpose of the creation of N'ko.

## CONCLUSION

The tensions surrounding language of instruction in mainstream schools in francophone West Africa include cultural identity, challenges facing current language of instruction used in the schools, challenges in implementing first acquired language of instruction, and economic struggles relating to first acquired language instruction in the schools. Cultural identities are at stake as communities are straining to participate in the global society while still holding on to their distinctiveness as a particular ethnic group.

Although French is instituted as the official language of instruction in the schools in Mali, qualitative research shows that Bambara is often used bilingually to assist the children in understanding the French language. Small, localized schools in both Burkina Faso and Mali have shown high rates of success in cultural identity, ownership, and literacy skills obtained by students through first acquired language instruction in the schools. Extensive research is inconclusive regarding the effects on literacy of language of instruction in the schools at this time.

French language instruction has not shown dramatic increases in literacy in these two countries, nor have there been extensive employment opportunities for French-language speakers in both Mali and Burkina Faso. Rather, children are more likely to become literate when learning in their first acquired language. In his study of a Mande community participating in an experimental first acquired language school, Muskin (1999) noted that “it is easier to learn to read and write in your maternal language (here, Bambara) than one you do not know (French)” (p. 42-43). This school showed staggering results on the path towards literacy with students performing almost 40% better on language tests than students in the mainstream French-language primary schools (Muskin, 1999). In Burkina Faso, the government has chosen to combat literacy by creating local language schools for adults (Lallou, 1998). Based on the results of first acquired language instruction, it would be more effective to begin instruction in first acquired languages at the primary level.

The challenge of designing first acquired language schools to promote literacy is surrounded by a need for inclusion of all children to have access to schooling in their native tongue. Burkina Faso and Mali are the hosts of more than 60 different languages. For two of the poorest countries in the world to create language textbooks, build schools, and train teachers in the first acquired languages of each member of these two nations would deplete numerous resources while risking the loss of a quarter of financial aid from France. National identity also becomes an issue in both of these nations. Because they are pluralistic societies, the governments must provide a forum from which to address all members of their nations equally. By using the language of the former colonizer, French is not the language of any one indigenous group and yet it is the language shared by all the indigenous groups of Burkina Faso and Mali. French language provides access to the global

world at the same time encouraging dependence on the former colonizer.

Fifty years after colonization, Burkina Faso and Mali are still struggling with providing an effective education system for the children of their nations: “African educators have to deal with a long history of European dominance of what constitutes valid and acceptable knowledge” (Dei, 2008, p. 233). When indigenous languages are not represented in academia, in print, or in the schools, there arises a disconnect and separation between indigenous societies and their languages and “Western” societies and their languages: “The storage within which knowledge about Africa is generated in the academy is consequently assembled in European languages” (Mazrui, 2003, p. 103). This lack of representation in scholarly work further indicates that mother-language instruction in the schools will not provide supplementary opportunities for the children of Mali and Burkina Faso.

Emphasis must be placed on the importance of these languages and the possession of literacy of the first acquired language languages in these societies. Malians and Burkinabe must begin to take ownership of their languages: “Ignace Sandwidi, Director of the Reform Institute, argued, ‘The purpose of teaching our languages is to restore young people’s identity, to teach them to learn to know themselves better before they begin to learn about the outside world’” (Lallou, 1998, p. 2). For two of the poorest countries in the world, “sustainable development, defined as many agencies are defining it today, is not possible without attention to questions of language choice and literacy ability” (Trudell, 2009, p. 73). Placing emphasis and importance on obtaining *literacy skills*, Mali and Burkina Faso will be able to regain power through expression of their citizens’ first acquired languages.

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