

Comparison of Private and Public School Performance in Francophone Africa: Lessons from the PASEC survey ☐

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1. Challenges for basic education in Francophone Africa

There has been much progress regarding access to schooling in Francophone Africa over the past two decades, mainly due to the international movements related to Education for All.

Nevertheless, this sector still has significant challenges, mainly due to socio-economic poverty and inequality. For example, let's look at the Human Development Index (HDI). Three categories of countries participating in the 2019 PASEC survey emerge from the data: 1) one country with a high HDI (Gabon, 115th), 2) two countries with a moderate HDI (Congo, 138th and Cameroon, 150th), 3) countries with a low HDI (all other countries). In addition, three categories also emerge in the updated classification of countries based on their income established by the World Bank: 1) one upper-middle-income country (Gabon), 2) five lower-middle-income countries (Benin, Cameroon, Congo, Côte d'Ivoire, and Senegal), 3) seven low-income countries (Burkina Faso, Chad, DRC, Guinea, Madagascar, Niger, and Togo) (PASEC, 2020). Thus, the WIDE-UNESCO database allows us to observe that in this context, especially in the countries in the third category, hundreds of thousands of children are still out of school, particularly students from disadvantaged backgrounds (Figure 1).

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Figure 1. Percentage of children of primary school age who are not in school

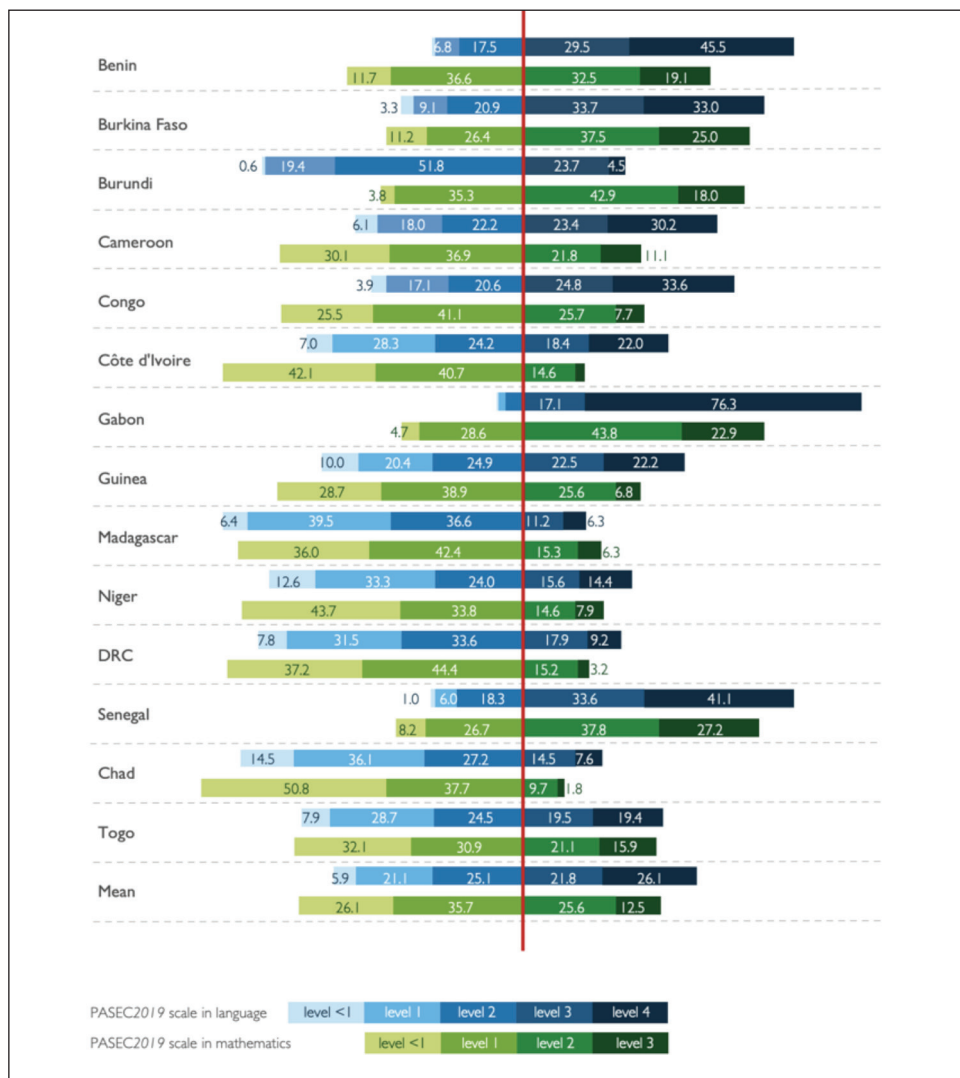


Source: WIDE-UNESCO, 2022

This unschooling issue is alarming because Sub-Saharan Africa is characterized by strong demographic growth, so there will always be more children to enrol in the coming decades (CONFEMEN, 2017). Since governments cannot meet this high demand by opening enough classes and recruiting teachers, public schools face overcrowded classrooms. As a result, the private sector has become an alternative for many parents faced with the lack of public provision (ReFPE, 2022).

Beyond access, which has been emphasized, the region faces serious quality challenges because many young people, after primary schooling, lack basic skills, particularly in reading and mathematics (Figure 2).

Figure 2. Percentage of students by proficiency level in reading and mathematics – Late primary



Source: PASEC, 2020

Concerning literacy, which is one of the HDI components, despite continuous improvement in its indicators worldwide, the adult literacy rate is still relatively low in sub-Saharan Africa: 59.6% for women and 72.8% for men in 2020. The number of literate young people aged 15 to 24 remained constant in this region in 2020 (74.2% for women and 79.5% in 2020) (UNESCO, 2021).

Many factors can explain this situation. First, we can address the challenges related to teachers. Even though it is the focus of attention at the international and national levels, the teaching profession has undergone a long and increasing period of casualization in Francophone Africa. This casualization corresponded to a double parallel political movement: first, the Structural Adjustment Programs of the 1980s-1990s, one of the effects of which was the departure of qualified civil servant teachers and the closure of many pre-service training centres; second, the Education for All initiatives, which focused primarily on access to schooling through the mass enrolment of students to the detriment of the quality of education and, consequently, the qualification of teachers. An extensive literature review on this issue (Lauwerier & Akkari, 2015) shows that teachers' working conditions in Sub-Saharan Africa can hinder the quality of education: they can foster a lack of motivation and professional commitment. Again, in this context, the quality of initial and in-service training has deteriorated for teachers with an already low level of schooling (for the majority, upper secondary level). In addition, the duration of these training courses has decreased significantly, and the content is often inappropriate. Finally, gaps in teachers' knowledge of pedagogical content and classroom practices undermine student learning and achievement (Akyeampong, Pryor, Westbrook & Lussier, 2011). Many authors, including Bashir, Lockheed, Ninan, and Tan (2018), insist on the importance of content mastery. While formal teacher certification is not always correlated with pupil learning, good teacher mastery of topics is associated with better learning in both high-income and low- and middle-income countries (Bold, *et al.*, 2017; Hill, Rowan & Ball, 2005).

The languages of instruction constitute another major challenge insofar as, since their independence, African countries have opted for different policies regarding the language of instruction. If some decided to use national languages (for instance, Wolof or Pulaar in Senegal), others chose to use the colonial language as the instruction language, while others adopted mixed language policies. It is crucial to consider the language of instruction in contexts where most children do not speak the language used in the classroom, which is the case in most French-speaking African countries. Recent works by Laitin and Ramachandran (2017) show, using the Demographic

and Health Survey (DHS), that a year of schooling in a local language system has a higher impact than a year of schooling in a colonially inherited language in terms of the probability of being able to read. Currently, in most French-speaking African countries, students must learn in a language neither they nor their teachers have fully mastered. Varly, Mazunya, and Thacker (2017) show that the excellent results of Burundi in comparison with other sub-Saharan countries are probably due to its choice to use Kirundi as the language of instruction. Ramachandran (2017) noted that research has been converging for at least a decade, emphasizing the importance of mother tongue education in early learning. It should be pointed out that the curricular approaches in force in most countries, particularly the Competency-Based Approach, would like students to be in an active position at the heart of knowledge construction. Moreover, this is to be put in parallel with the pedagogical means that are inadequate with the ambitions of these approaches (Lauwerier, 2016).

This general situation in the Francophone African context, along with the growing development of the private sector (see also the other chapters of this book), leads us to the following question: To what extent has research shown better performance in the private or public education sector? We will now see that the literature on this question is not consensual.

2. Private-public sector comparison

Research comparing performance between private and public students has been conducted primarily in the context of Anglophone Africa. Baum & Riley (2019), offering a synthesis of previous research and a new study, focuses on the productivity of public and private schools in Sub-Saharan Africa, particularly Kenya. The authors find a robust causal advantage of private school performance in reading and math. Private school students outperform their public school peers by one-quarter to one-half standard deviation. These estimates are smaller than those found previously by Bold et al. (2013) in the Kenyan context.

Nevertheless, the effect sizes found in this study represent a substantial difference in performance. These results support the findings in the literature on school choice in Africa: parents favour private schools because of the higher quality of education they offer. In his study on the Global South, Aslam (2017) shows that “there is evidence of certain types of non-state actors being able to achieve better learning outcomes than state school counterparts (moderate evidence for low-fee private (LFP) schools and philanthropic schools) and of certain types of arrangements with governments

(subsidies to non-state actors) showing weakly positive indications of improved educational quality” (p. 2).

In the same vein, research conducted by the Francophone Research Network on the Privatization of Education (ReFPE) in 2021 and 2022 in five countries (Burkina Faso, Côte d’Ivoire, Morocco, Niger, and Togo) shows that families, including those from disadvantaged socioeconomic backgrounds, are pushed to choose either not to go to school or to go to a private school when the quality of their education is poor. According to families, school performance is better in private than public schools. Among the arguments often mentioned, we find recurrent teacher strikes that do not allow the school program to be completed, the poor quality and inadequacy of materials in the public sector, and the overcrowded school environment.

However, we must be cautious since this same research has shown that teachers are better qualified in the public sector – while noting the porous nature of the borders since these same teachers can teach in the private sector to supplement their salary (ReFPE, 2022). Also, the recent GEMR-UNESCO report (2021) urges caution about the rationality of parental choice:

A foundational assumption among those who support non-state schools and school choice is that parents, as consumers, have access to information about the best schools and use that information efficiently. In practice, [...], this is a fallacy [...] In any case, parents often ignore such information. They choose schools that appeal to them for other reasons: religious beliefs, convenience, and students’ demographic characteristics. In fact, parents often look for schools whose students have the social status to which they aspire and take advice from their social networks. Finally, in practice, school choice is not available for many households, notably those in rural areas (p.14)

Beyond the choice of families, research suggests possible explanations for the better performance of private schools, specifically in Francophone Africa.

Indeed, in analysing the characteristics of private provision, the ReFPE research (2022) points out that, in all levels of education – from preschool to higher education – the quality of private institutions, except community-based schools, is better than that of the public. We will see later that the PASEC data complement this finding.

Moreover, private students perform better because they generally do not come from the same residential and socioeconomic backgrounds as public students. For example, some regions of Burkina Faso have almost no private schools. Likewise, children of farmers hardly attend private schools (ReFPE, 2022). Nevertheless, even controlling for parental socioeconomic status, some research, particularly in Latin

America, shows that private school students perform better (Reyes Cayul & Akkari, 2017). Note, however, that residential background is rarely considered.

We maintain that, beyond the private supply itself, privatization creates disparities between populations of different socioeconomic levels. Indeed, tutoring can be an angle of private support given to students in addition to the teaching they receive in schools. This is what some authors like Mark call “shadow education” (Bray, 2021). Moreover, currently, this support benefits far more advantaged families (Harvey, 2005; Ward, 2014).

Thus, in this chapter, we will highlight what the PASEC survey data tell us about the performance of private versus public school students. We will also highlight in the conclusion what these data do not tell us to see what research needs to be done to understand the phenomenon better. Note that this is the first research to mobilize PASEC data to compare private and public performance.

3. Methodology

We used data from the CONFEMEN Education Systems Analysis Program (PASEC) evaluations, particularly the PASEC2019 survey.

Created in 1991, PASEC conducts learning assessments in basic education. Between 2014 and 2021, PASEC produced data and analyses on the comparative performance of education systems (PASEC2014 and PASEC2019). In general, the results of these assessments show that education systems in Francophone Africa still have problems with the quality of learning.

PASEC’s methodology is based on a sample survey of schools, classes, and students in each grade (end and beginning). For each country, a representative sample school is selected in grade 6 and half of sample is selected randomly in grade 2. Tests are administered to students after they are drawn from a class at the beginning (2nd grade) or the end of school (6th grade).

At the beginning of the school year, the tests are administered in two phases: about 30 minutes per student to answer the questions related to the language tests and about 20 minutes per student to answer the questions related to the mathematics tests, and a very light questionnaire about their characteristics, family environment, and educational resources.

At the end of the school year, the tests are presented as multiple-choice questions (MCQs) in a “paper and pencil” format, administered collectively and independently. The test is organized in several stages: the reading comprehension items, the

mathematics items, and the response to a questionnaire on their characteristics, their family environment, educational resources, and their well-being at school.

In the PASEC2019 evaluation and for the first time, the PASEC survey integrated data collection from teachers through four equivalent types of booklets comprising five parts, including reading comprehension, didactics of reading comprehension, mathematics, didactics of mathematics, and a context questionnaire on their individual characteristics, their professional experience and status, the characteristics of their class, information on their teaching, their pedagogical collaboration and their working conditions.

A questionnaire is also sent to school principals. It covers the principal's characteristics, their school's characteristics, inspection elements, relations with parents and the community, pedagogical aspects, management, and school life.

The PASEC data may also have several limitations, which make us cautious in our analyses. For example, schools linked to diplomatic missions, which enrol thousands of students, are not included in the private schools either. More generally, they are not included in official country school databases. However, even in Senegal and Côte d'Ivoire, since these schools are located only in cities and only in two or three large cities, in terms of population, they do not represent much.

In particular, they may not contain information on all types of existing private schools, even though the selection of schools in PASEC is made by stratification. This stratification first divides the schools by region or department of the country. Then, based on this categorization, the schools are selected according to the weight of public, private, or community schools (Table 1).

However, the category "private school" may not reflect the wide variety of private schools outside of state control and, therefore, not reflected in official data, particularly unregistered private schools that are often considered poor quality (ReFPE, 2022).

Table 1. Distribution of school type in PASEC surveys

	PUBLIC		PRIVATE		COMMUNITY	
	Percentage	Standard error	Percentage	Standard error	Percentage	Standard error
Benin	62.8	2.7	37.2	2.7	0.0	0.0
Burkina Faso	68.1	2.3	29.2	2.0	2.7	1.0
Burundi	93.6	2.0	6.4	2.0	0.0	0.0
Cameroon	67.5	2.4	29.6	2.1	2.8	1.6
Congo	53.1	2.6	44.8	2.6	2.1	0.9
Côte d'Ivoire	83.4	2.9	15.7	2.8	0.9	0.6
Gabon	63.9	3.3	36.1	3.3	0.0	0.0
Guinea	60.0	2.8	39.5	2.9	0.5	0.5
Madagascar	66.6	3.5	30.6	3.3	2.8	1.0
Niger	95.7	0.8	4.3	0.8	0.0	0.0
DRC	74.7	3.8	20.0	3.4	5.2	1.6
Senegal	81.8	3.5	18.2	3.5	0.0	0.0
Chad	67.2	3.1	12.6	2.5	20.2	2.8
Togo	66.1	1.4	33.0	1.4	0.9	0.6
Average	71.4	0.7	25.9	0.7	2.7	0.3

Source: PASEC2019 data

Nevertheless, the PASEC data, despite the limitations mentioned above, constitute a wealth of information that is very important for steering education systems. The database contains information on 62,934 students in 3,540 schools in 14 countries participating in the evaluation. These data are also among the most reliable in French-speaking Africa. Thus, beyond the fact that this survey allows for a comparison between many countries and periods (regular surveys), it supports our choice to mobilize these data for this research.

It should be noted that the availability of quality data for comparing private and public education is a significant challenge in Francophone Africa. In this context, having complete databases with school statistics is difficult. However, these statistical data do not include personal information that could justify the withholding of information by the ministries in charge of education. Therefore, how can critical data analysis be made possible without free and easy access to these data? Beyond the availability of data, there is the question of their quality. For example, when we have statistical yearbooks, they present aggregated data. However, they do not always allow for a detailed analysis

between the private and public sectors and even less for a detailed analysis of the different categories of private education. Also, in some countries, the quality of the forms filled in by the directors of private schools is lower than that of public schools, which explains why specific data concerning private schools seem “abnormal.”

Results

We will first present the characteristics of private and public schools in a comparative perspective based on PASEC data and then highlight the differences in performance on PASEC tests in the public and private sectors. This will then allow us to draw conclusions about the quality of the private and public sectors while noting the limitations of this type of analysis.

1. Characteristics of private and public offers

In this section, we highlight the characteristics of private and public offers based on PASEC data, which, it should be recalled, concerns a large sample of schools in Francophone Africa.

a. Teachers

This paragraph highlights specific characteristics of teachers in the private and public sectors. These are the academic level of teachers and their experience.

Academic level

In most countries covered by PASEC, the proportion of teachers with a university degree is higher in the public sector than in the private sector, except in Benin, Cameroon, Chad, Congo, Guinea, and Madagascar.

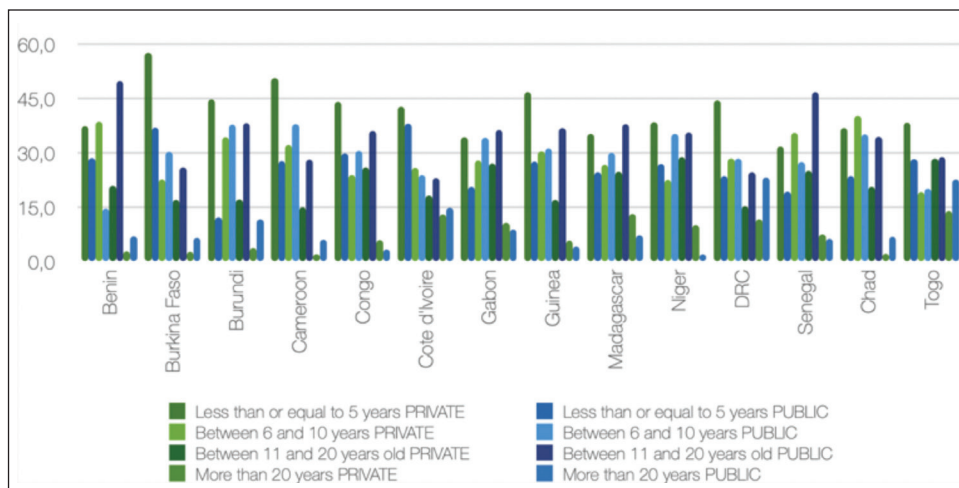
More specifically, in both the public and private sectors, there is a higher proportion of teachers with secondary education than university education. For example, the proportion of teachers with a secondary level is 66.4% in the private sector and 75.6% in the public sector in Benin. These proportions are, for example, 85.6% and 80.8%, respectively, in Burkina, 90.7% and 92.8% in the DRC, 73.4% and 68.6% in Togo, and 78.5% and 91.9% in Niger.

Experience

In all countries, most private-sector teachers have a maximum of 10 years of experience. The same situation is observed in the public sector, except in Benin, Senegal,

and Togo, where nearly 50% of teachers have between 11 and 20 years of experience (Figure 3).

Figure 3. Percentage of teachers by years in service



Source: PASEC2019 data

b. Equipment and educational resources

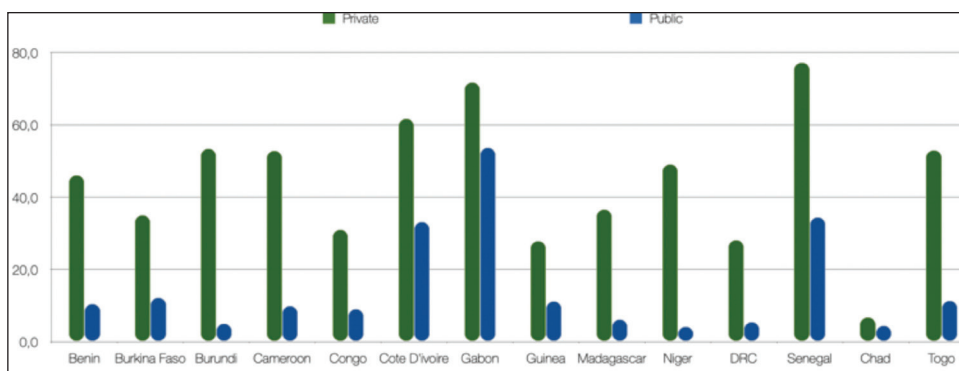
As noted in the literature in this context, the level of equipment in private schools is generally of higher quality. This kind of information is collected from teachers through a series of questions about classroom equipment availability.

The data show that, on average, the level of equipment is a little higher in private school classrooms than in public school classrooms. This means private school classes are better equipped on average than public schools, although the situation may be the opposite in some private schools.

More concretely, PASEC data provides information on the existence of a teacher's desk in the classroom. In general, teachers sometimes do not have a desk in both the public and private sectors. In more than half the countries, the proportion of teachers with a desk in their classroom is higher in private school classrooms than in public school classrooms. In Benin, the proportion of teachers with a desk is 90% in private schools and 90.3% in public schools. In Senegal, these proportions are 84% and 86.5%, respectively. In Niger, they are 96.4% and 57%, respectively.

The availability of electricity in classrooms is also analysed in this study. Although the availability of electricity is evident in some localities, it is found that even in urban areas, some classrooms do not have access to electricity. According to the data, a higher proportion of private school classrooms have electricity in all countries than public schools. For example, in Senegal, 77.3 per cent of private schools and 67.1 per cent of public schools have electricity. In Madagascar, these proportions are 36.6% and 6.1%, respectively (Figure 4).

Figure 4. Existence of electricity in classes between public and private



Source: PASEC2019 data

c. School management and life

Teachers' assessment of their school's management

In the questionnaire sent to teachers, PASEC asked a series of questions about their assessment of their working conditions. Among these questions, one concerns the quality of school management.

In most countries, public school teachers seem to appreciate the quality of their school's management better than private ones, except in Niger, for example, where 80.8% of private school teachers consider the quality of their school's management to be "good," compared to 71.9% of public-school teachers.

Management by school principals

The experience of principals is tracked in the PASEC data not only by the number of years spent as a principal but also by the number of years spent as a teacher before becoming a principal. In slightly more than half of the countries, the average years spent as a principal is almost identical in both the private and public sectors. In Benin and Madagascar, the average years spent as a principal is higher in the private sector (12.3 years for Benin and 10.1 years for Madagascar) than in the public sector (6 years for Benin and 6.2 years for Madagascar). In the DRC and Cameroon, public sector directors (16.4 years for the DRC and 8.6 years for Cameroon) have more years of experience than their private sector counterparts (6.2 years for the DRC and 6.3 years for Cameroon). As for past teaching experience before being assigned to the position of principal, we can see that in half the countries (Benin, Cameroon, Chad, Côte d'Ivoire, Gabon, Senegal, and Togo), private and public principals have almost the same number of years of teaching experience. In Congo and Niger, private principals (13.6 years for Niger and 12.2 years for Congo) have more teaching experience than their public counterparts (7.3 years for Niger and 9.1 years for Congo). In contrast, in Burkina Faso, Burundi, Guinea, Madagascar, and the DRC, public school principals have more years of teaching experience than their private school counterparts.

Additional pedagogical training, pedagogical leadership training, and on-going or additional training in school management

In characterizing public and private schools, the training received by school managers is an element of this study. While the proportion of school principals who have received additional pedagogical training varies from one country to another, a difference between public and private schools, although not very remarkable in several countries, seems to be significant in Cameroon (81.3% in the private sector compared with 63.8% in the public sector) and Senegal (74.5% in the private sector compared with 53.3% in the public sector). Concerning principals receiving additional training in leading a teaching team, the differences in proportions are remarkable in Côte d'Ivoire (65% for the private sector versus 35.3% for the public sector) and Senegal (73.6% for the private sector versus 31.7% for the public sector), Gabon (73% for the private sector versus 56.8% for the public sector) and the DRC (54.9% for the private sector versus 73.8% for the public sector). As for the benefit of continuous or complementary training on school management, the differences in favour of the private sector are remarkable in Benin (26.1% for the private sector versus 14.7% for

the public sector), Burundi (42.7% for the private sector versus 32% for the public sector) Cameroon (60.4% private versus 37.2% public), Congo (48.3% private versus 34% public), Senegal (60.3% private versus 27.6% public), and Togo (63.8% private versus 50.3% public). In Madagascar and the DRC, the proportion difference favours public sector managers (Table 2).

Table 2. Percentage of principals by additional pedagogical training, pedagogical leadership training, and continuing or additional training in school management

	Have you received any additional pedagogical training as a director in the last two years (seminar, refresher course, etc.)?		Have you received additional training in leading a teaching team in the last two years?		Have you received any in-service or additional training in school management in the past two years?	
	Private	Public	Private	Public	Private	Public
Benin	29.0	24.4	38.7	36.2	26.1	14.7
Burkina Faso	29.0	34.7	24.6	19.3	18.7	13.4
Burundi	38.1	33.5	21.1	16.3	42.7	32.0
Cameroon	81.3	63.8	75.6	69.9	60.4	37.2
Congo	72.1	42.1	62.8	54.5	48.3	34.0
Cote d'Ivoire	64.8	48.3	65.0	35.3	44.2	38.0
Gabon	66.3	62.7	73.0	56.8	55.4	48.7
Guinea	65.4	47.7	42.0	46.2	38.9	31.7
Madagascar	49.7	56.1	36.7	50.0	20.4	40.6
Niger	55.2	49.4	58.4	51.4	56.4	48.9
DRC	79.1	81.3	54.9	73.8	54.9	75.6
Senegal	74.5	53.3	73.6	31.7	60.3	27.6
Chad	47.1	51.8	39.8	50.9	53.0	53.6
Togo	87.2	78.8	59.8	40.7	63.8	50.3

Source: PASEC2019 data

It should be added to this analysis of the additional training received by principals. Most principals in the public and private sectors state that they are involved in administrative and pedagogical matters to manage classes properly.

Daily management of school life

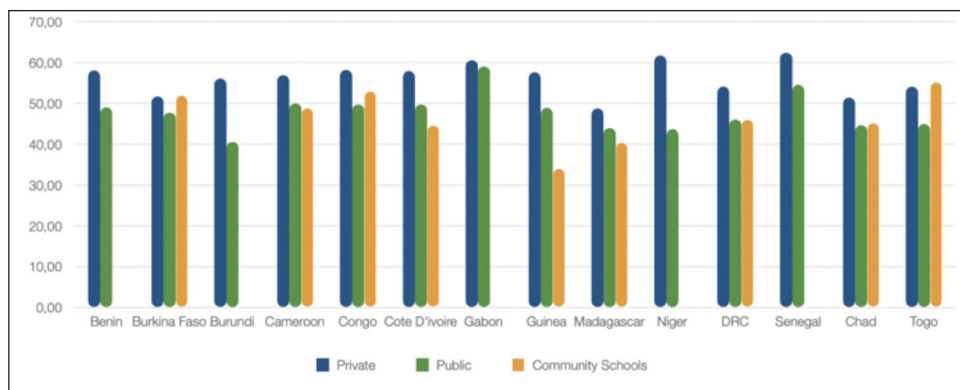
In daily school life management, a teacher may be absent from a class for some reason. In order to be able to respect the time quantum and for the students to benefit from the lessons planned following the school calendar, the PASEC questionnaire asked how the directors, who are responsible for the school's management, arrange the lessons to make up for the teacher's absence. No private school principal asks students to go home in most countries (9 out of 14). Moreover, a significant majority (ranging from 55% to 96%) of both public and private school principals report that "students are occupied by a teacher from another class" or "they replace the teacher themselves," with proportions varying from country to country and between public and private. In the private sector, particularly in three countries (Benin, Guinea, Madagascar), principals (in a tiny proportion, between 1.6% and 3.2%) report using a retiree to replace a teacher. Although we found that both public and private schools offer to tutor the weakest students at the beginning and end of primary school, the proportions are overwhelmingly high in private schools.

d. Socioeconomic characteristics of parents and student support

The socioeconomic status of students is measured by an index constructed based on questions about the availability of material goods in the household and the characteristics of the dwelling (television, computer, radio, DVD player, cell phone, freezer or refrigerator, air conditioner, fan, stove, means of transportation, materials used for the construction of the dwelling house, latrines with or without running water, electricity, etc.). It should be noted that the PASEC survey attempted to collect data on school fees. However, the information was not sufficiently reliable because some gave overall school fees instead of providing fees per student. As a result, we have information on fees exceeding 25,000,000 FCFA, which is unrealistic.

According to the data, the socioeconomic level of parents of private school students is, on average higher than that of parents of public school students (see figure below). The highest gap in the index between public and private schools is found in Niger (18 points), followed by Burundi (15.5 points), Togo, Benin, and Guinea (9 points). To complete this picture, the socioeconomic situation of students in community schools, who are not included in the private/public comparison, is sometimes mixed. In some countries, the socioeconomic level is lower in community schools than in public schools (Figure 5).

Figure 5. Evidence between parental socioeconomic level in public, private, and community schools



Source: PASEC2019 data

It should also be considered that not all students have access to tutoring, depending on their parents' socioeconomic level. Again, this is a source of inequality that impacts school performance.

In the literature review, we discussed the issue of shadow education as a factor that promotes disparities between populations of different socioeconomic backgrounds. Therefore, we can present the PASEC data concerning the issue of shadow education. This support occurs either to help students with difficulty to fill their gaps or to help students who are already successful in improving their results.

The PASEC data allow us to know whether students are supported by a teacher-repeater, which is an additional financial burden for households. On average, practicing teachers or tutors provide slightly less than one-third (26.6%) of tutoring. This percentage is highest in Benin (41.7%) and lowest in Madagascar (5.7%). In public schools, tutoring is provided by teachers/repeaters on average at less than 25%, with a higher proportion in Senegal (33.9%) and a low proportion in Madagascar (7%). In private schools, the proportion of teachers/repeaters providing tutoring exceeds 30%, with the same country leading the way (Senegal, 56.5%) and Madagascar (4.5%) having the lowest proportion.

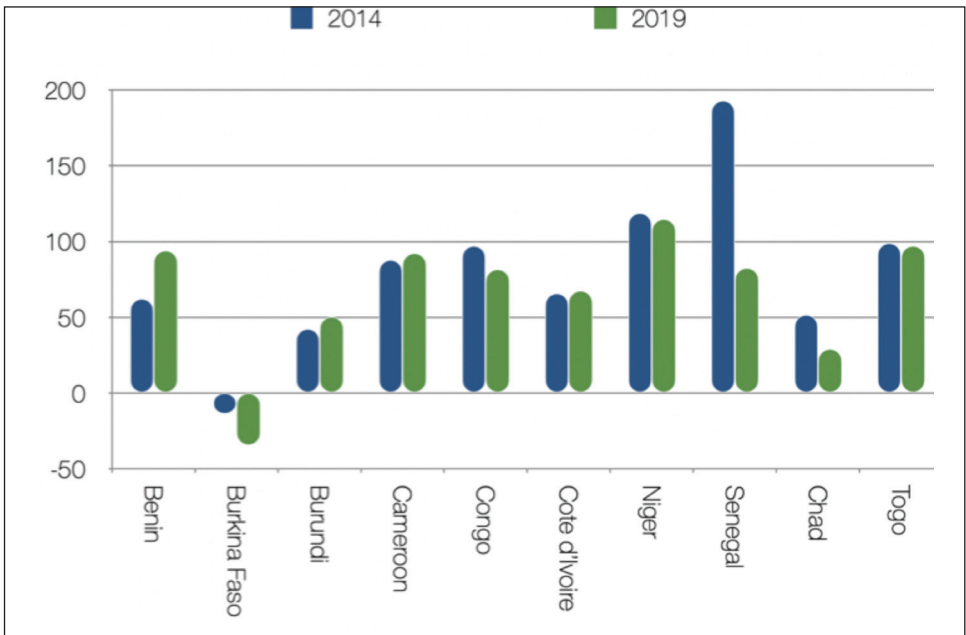
Thus, these characteristics of the private and public offers, according to the PASEC data, provide us with part of the explanation for the student's academic performance, a point we will address in the next section, highlighting, in particular, the performance gaps between private and public students.

2. Performance gaps

According to the data, a difference in performance is to the advantage of private school students in all countries in language and mathematics. These results confirming the better performance of private school students are consistent with what has been found in research comparing the performance of private and public school students in Africa.

In general, the language performance of private school students is better than that of public school students, except in Burkina Faso (Figure 6). The differences are also relatively significant. For example, in Senegal, the gap in 2014 was nearly 200 points, which has narrowed over time. On the other hand, in some countries, the gap between private and public is widening over time, as in Benin. There is not a big difference in reading scores in Burundi, perhaps because of the national language of instruction (Kirundi). One possible way to regulate the private sector is to control the languages of instruction.

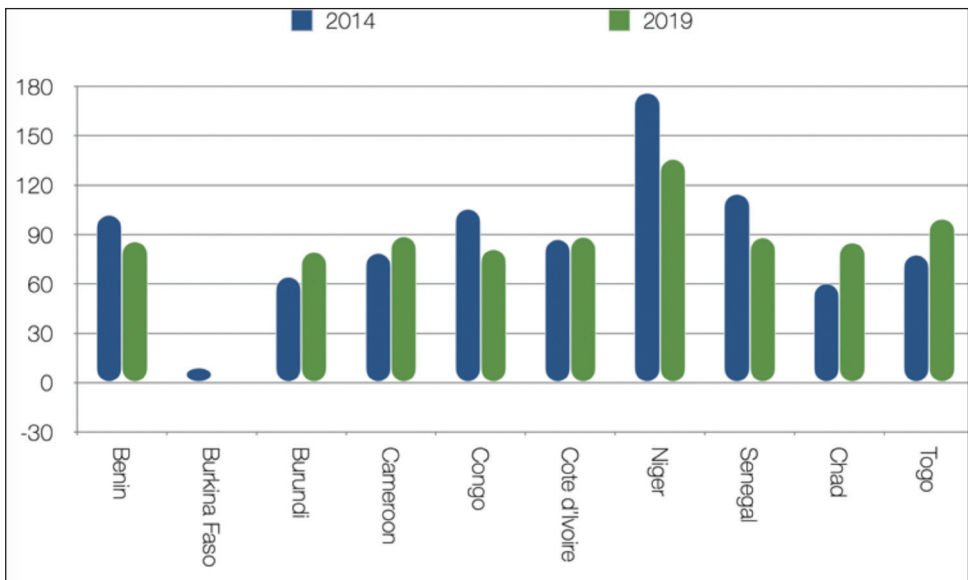
Figure 6. Public-Private Language Performance Gap – Early Elementary (2014 and 2019)



Source: PASEC2014 and PASEC2019 data

The performance gaps are still huge at the end of primary school (Figure 7). In half of the countries, the gap between private and public schools is widening over time. In Niger, a gap of over 180 points in 2014. And more than 130 points in 2019 between private and public. In Senegal, the gaps are smaller at the end of primary school than at the beginning. Once again, in Burkina Faso, there is no real distinction in terms of performance between private and public schools.

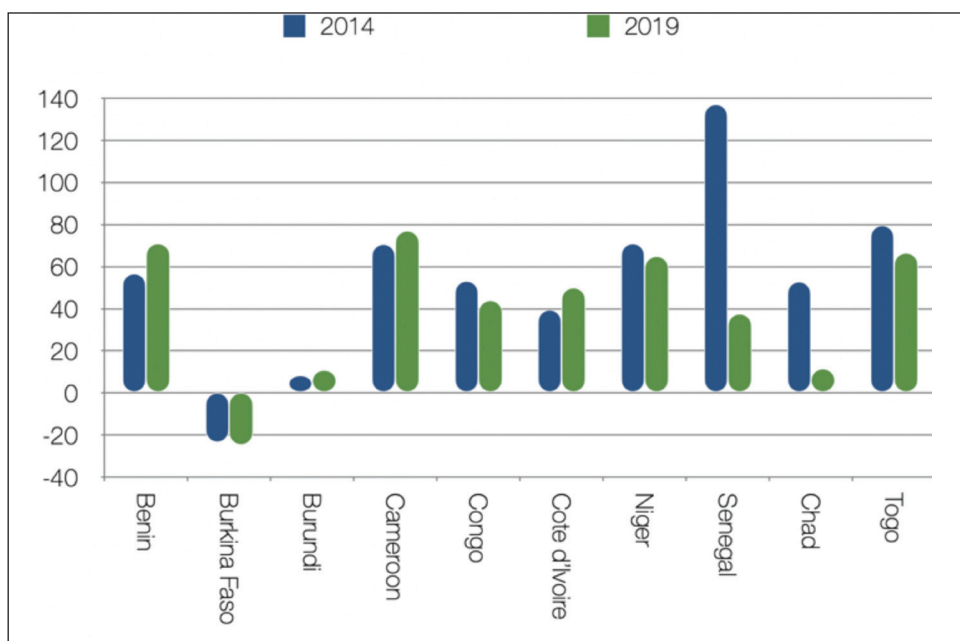
Figure 7. Public-private reading performance gap – End of elementary school (2014 and 2019)



Source: PASEC2014 and PASEC2019 data

In mathematics, the performance of private school students is generally better than that of public school students. Again, the differences are relatively significant, except in Burkina Faso and Burundi (Figure 8).

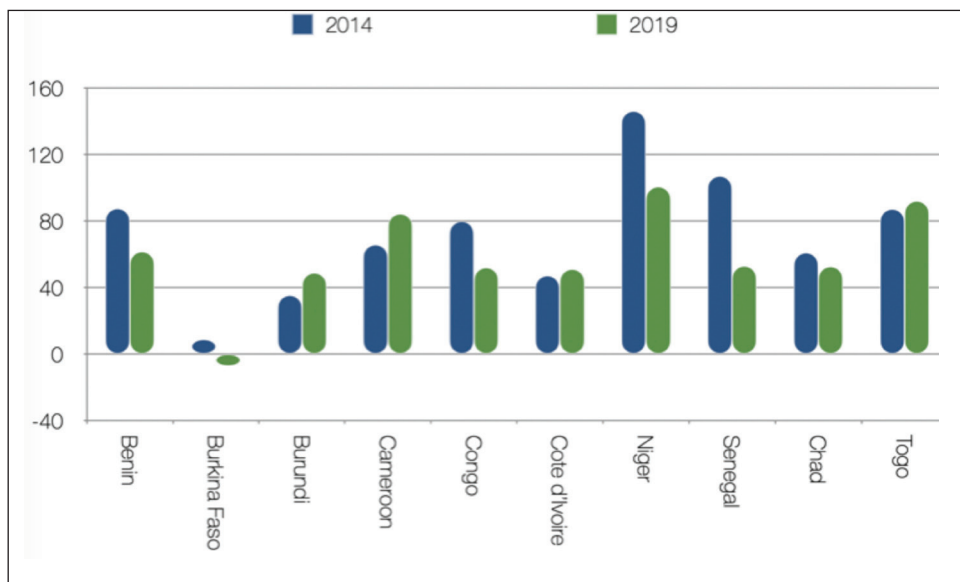
Figure 8. Public-private math performance gap - Early elementary grades (2014 and 2019)



Source: PASEC2014 and PASEC2019 data

At the end of primary school, the gaps are still significant but are narrowing over time in 6 out of 10 countries. Niger had a high gap of nearly 140 points in 2014, which was substantially reduced in 2019 (Figure 9). The narrowing of the gap between 2014 and 2019 can be attributed to the numerous reforms undertaken by Niger to not only improve student performance in both public and private schools, but also to reduce existing disparities between the country's regions, school categories and urban and rural areas. Indeed, following the results of the PASEC2014 evaluation, Niger has undertaken a number of reforms to its education system.

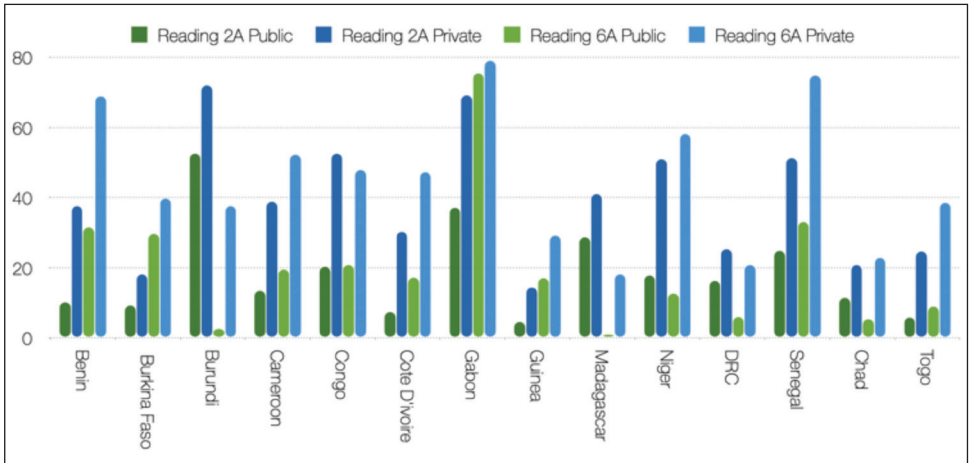
**Figure 9. Public-Private Mathematics Performance Gap
End of Elementary School (2014 and 2019)**



Source: PASEC2014 and PASEC2019 data

Concerning differences in the proficiency scales, it should first be noted that the best students are located in the bottom level (corresponding in Level 4 in reading and Level 3 in math). These students are likely fluent in the tasks at this level and better at the lower levels. There is a clear difference in most countries between private and public schools. This difference is even more significant at the end of primary school. Indeed, more private school students are in level 4 (Figure 10). For example, more than 70% of private pupils in Senegal are at this level. In Gabon, we note that in both the private and public sectors, there is a significant proportion of students at the end of primary school in level 4 reading.

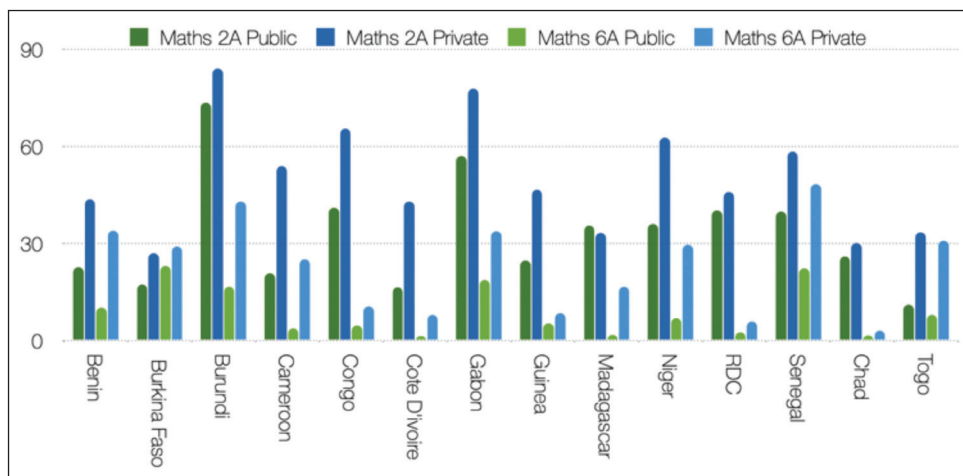
Figure 10. Percentage of students in Level 4 of the reading proficiency scale – Late and early elementary – 2019



Source: PASEC2019 data

The same findings are also made in math at level 3 (corresponding at best level in competency scales). On average, while private students are much better in early elementary school, the gaps are less clear at the end of school (Figure 11). Gabon and Burundi are the two countries where the public sector performs well. In Niger, there is a large gap between the private and public sectors. One might ask, why do public school students do better in math than reading?

Figure 11. Percentage of students in Level 3 of the math proficiency scale – Early and Late Elementary – 2019

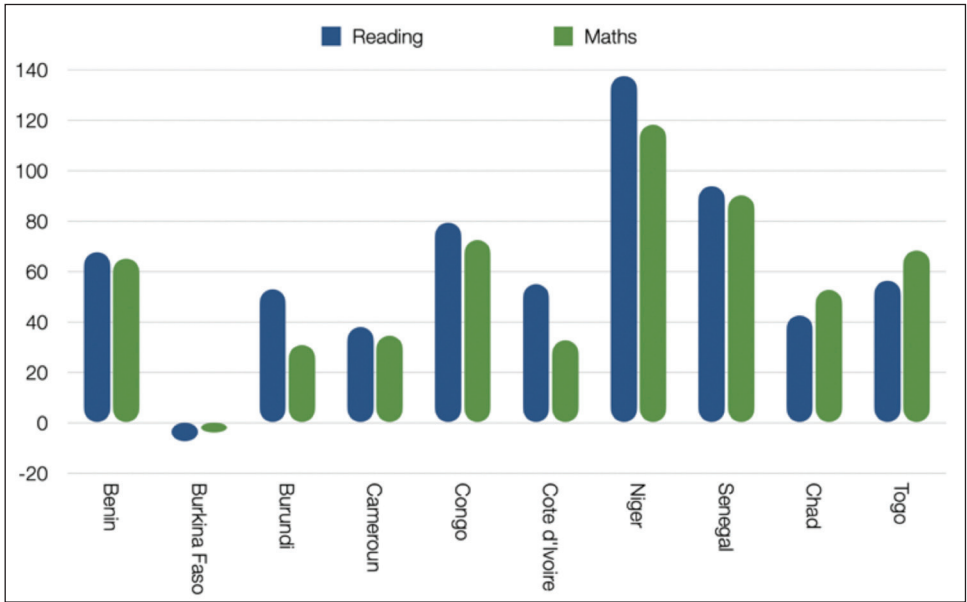


Source: PASEC2019 data

By gender, there are no significant differences between boys and girls in either public or private schools. However, girls generally are a little better at reading than boys, while boys are a little better at math.

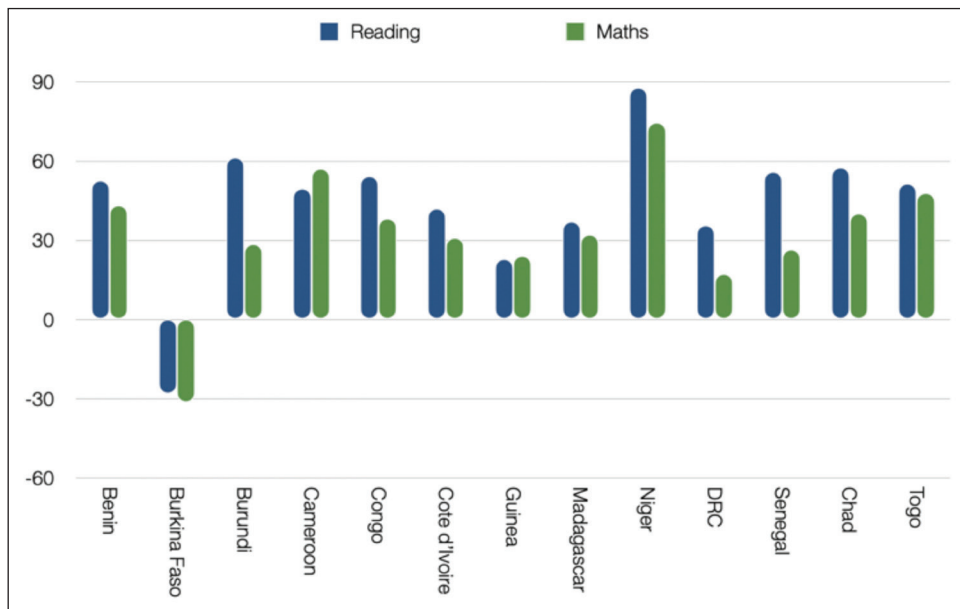
Although we noted that the socioeconomic level of parents of private students is, on average higher than that of parents of public students, even considering land-use and socioeconomic index in our analysis, the gap between public and private remains persistent, except in Burkina Faso (Figure 12 and 13).

Figure 12. Performance gap between private and public students at the end of elementary school controlled for the land-use index and the average socioeconomic index of students in the school (PASEC2014)



Source: PASEC2014 data

Figure 13. Performance gap between private and public students at the end of elementary school controlled for the land-use index of students in the school (PASEC2019)

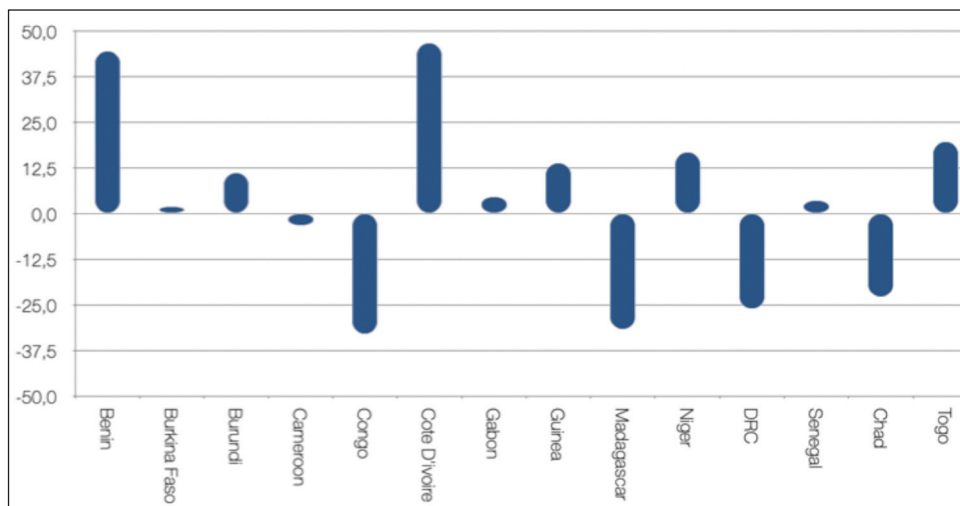


Source: PASEC2019 data

For private tutoring, there is a difference in reading performance to the advantage:

- Of students participating in tutoring significantly in Benin (+44.4 points), Cote d'Ivoire (+46.7 points), Niger (+16.7 points), and Togo (+19.7 points).
- Of students without educational support significantly in Congo (-33) to Madagascar (31.7 points), DRC (26.2 points), and Chad (22.8 points) (Figure 14).

**Figure 14. Difference in Reading Performance
Support from a Teacher or Tutor**

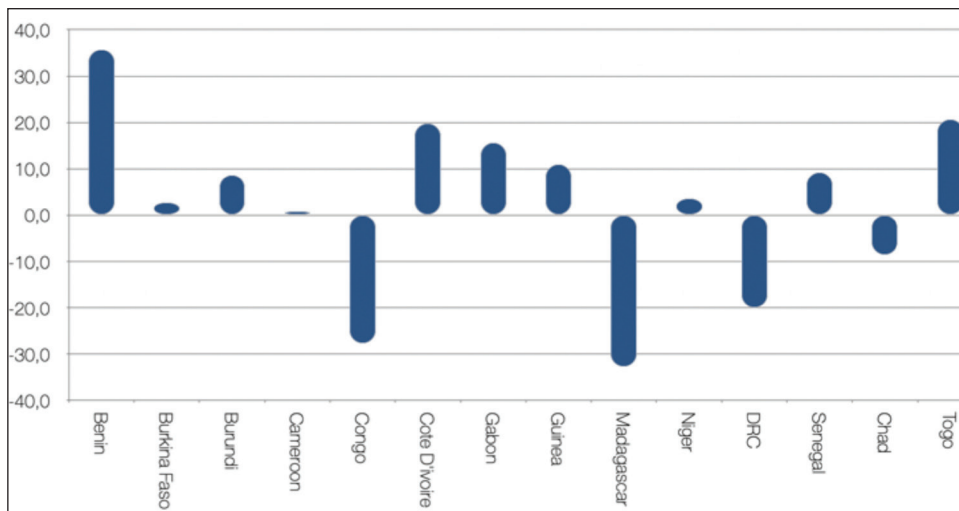


Source: PASEC2019 data

In mathematics, there is a difference in performance to the advantage:

- of students participating in tutoring significantly in Benin (35.7 points), Cote d'Ivoire (19.7 points), Gabon (15.6 points), and Togo (20.7 points),
- of students without school support in Congo (27.8 points), Madagascar (32.9 points), and DRC (20 points) (Figure 15).

Figure 15. Difference in Math Performance – Support from a Teacher or Tutor



Source: PASEC2019 data

Conclusion

To conclude, PASEC data show that, on average, a significant gap exists in student performance in favour of the private sector at the beginning and end of primary school. This gap is marked both in languages and mathematics.

Like the literature on the subject, we have several explanations for these better results. First, data on school supply shows that private schools are better equipped than public schools, particularly in terms of electricity and equipment in classrooms and schools in French-speaking sub-Saharan Africa. This is generally due to a higher financial contribution from parents since the analysis of the socioeconomic level of parents also shows better social positioning of parents who enrol their children in private schools. This is also linked to the possibility of taking support courses outside of school time. These comparisons clearly show the risk of reproducing inequalities generated by the privatization phenomenon in Francophone African countries, even if the socioeconomic factor is not the only one to explain the differences in performance between the two sectors.

Indeed, the PASEC data provide additional explanations since contextual data on school management were collected. Among other things, it shows that school

principals can make a difference. For example, we have seen that in the private sector, they attend in-service training on a more regular basis, find solutions when teachers are absent so as not to lose teaching hours for students, and take care to provide academic support for students in difficulty.

On the other hand, the PASEC data do not tell us that all private schools systematically perform better than public schools and offer students better learning conditions than public schools. Moreover, performance gaps between private and public schools (in 2014 and 2019 and in Years two and six) are widening in some countries and narrowing in others, so there are no unanimous trends.

In addition, questions remain following the analysis of the PASEC data. Is it the teachers who make the difference in student learning outcomes? We found that private school teachers were less qualified or motivated than public school teachers. Even here, the answer is not straightforward because we know, as we showed in the literature review, that it is common to find teachers who work in private and public schools. Is the difference in the number of hours of teaching effectively done?

Another issue is the language of instruction. We also know from numerous research studies that language proficiency significantly impacts the quality of learning. However, the PASEC data do not inform us about strategies for using the languages of instruction while assuming that urban and socio-economically advantaged students, who are more likely to attend private schools, are more aware of using French in their daily environment. To go further in this comparative analysis, additional investigations are necessary. In particular, conducting qualitative research, including interviews and observations, might be relevant to understand better what distinguishes private and public schools to achieve the performance described in the article while expanding the type of schools analysed, including non-state schools.

Finally, the central policy question is: how can the public sector be strengthened? The purpose of our research is not to advocate for the private sector. In particular, the commercial private sector cannot be generalized. Thus, how can we ensure that the public sector has the same requirements as the private sector, knowing that it must consider the most marginalized populations (low socioeconomic families, rural areas)? In any case, this study points to the inability of states to offer quality public services.

Beyond this political will, to ensure a better understanding of the PASEC data, these data should be complemented with the national statistics of each country. To do this, states must commit to developing a comprehensive system for collecting data on education at all levels and making it freely available on the websites of ministries of education. This is essential both to build targeted education policies based on

solid scientific foundations and to facilitate access to these data for the various actors of civil society and students and researchers in the countries concerned. This would complement the data from the PASEC surveys, which to date are the most rigorous for conducting comparative analyses of education systems in Francophone Africa, particularly on the critical issue of learning outcomes.

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