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# Entangled navigations: Intergenerational care relations in neoliberal eduscapes in Benin

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## Abstract
Though often overlooked, parental navigations play an important role in the difficult pathways of rural children through changing eduscapes in northern Benin. Arguing that parents are deeply involved in their children's trajectories towards making a living, I analyse the care and support parents see themselves as responsible for. A neoliberal and increasingly privatized schooling system creating unequal chances in combination with the demand of 'Education for all' responsibilizes parents for their children's success, and a tight labour market makes it additionally difficult for youth to find positions in the urban space. In consequence, parents are more intensively investing in their children's education and related costs than ever before, without feeling that these investments lead to what parents value as success. Due to the lack of parental experience in the neoliberal eduscapes and the lack of cultural and social capitals – parents describe it as 'blindness' – parental actions in the eduscapes could best be described as navigations which are entangled with those of their children. In these navigations, parents give their children what they never received from their own parents, but also expect or hope them to become what they never were. Both parents and children navigate, I argue, towards an unknown and uncertain future in 'radical openness'.

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## Introduction

Tonnu ma an gberu bosunu n da, ma ku n go, a ne yensona ka sina, an ma wasi, an ma damo, gusuno u n ki, ka gaso go.

If a man walks around [hunting], misses his kill and then sits at home, he won't find more [game]. But if you keep walking around, God willing you'll kill something.

(Yarou, Tebo, July 2019)

Yarou, a 75-year-old small farmer from the village of Tebo in northern Benin,[1] mentioned this Baatonu proverb as we discussed his children's difficulties in completing their formal education. Despite the effort he and his wives had made, not one had managed to get into a university. He had hoped that at least one would become a civil servant in the city, which did not happen, but he told me that, like the proverbial hunter who never gives up after missing his target, he would continue to support his children (and even grandchildren) through school. One would eventually succeed, he insisted.

Yarou's sons and daughters, like many other children from rural northern Benin, are surrounded by parental aspirations, advice and material support. However, the efforts made are rarely sufficient. Most adolescents and young adults seek jobs in urban areas or additional support through their partners while they are attending secondary school or university. Despite their parents' support, many of them report that they suffer from a lack of money and resources.

Parents themselves navigate uncertaincy when they accompany and support their children's trajectories, because these are often far from their own experiences and competencies.[2] These 'navigations' (Christiansen et al., 2006, Dawson, 2014) could best be described as 'open-ended' (Cooper and Pratten, 2015). With Simone (2021: 1343), I suggest understanding them as taking place in 'radical openness'.

I became aware of that openness in 1998, when Yarou sadly told me that his eldest living son,[3] Ousmane, had dropped out one year before finishing secondary school. Although Yarou had suggested he stayed with an uncle in a nearby town, attend secondary school there, and eventually seek a position as a civil servant in the city, he had not been able to convince his son to stay on at school. Years later, Ousmane confirmed that he had indeed left school against his father's wishes. When staying in town for schooling, he had regularly joined his uncle to work in the fields, but also felt that Yarou needed help with his plots, as there were younger siblings to support. He also shared that he was under the impression that he would be able to choose a professional career later, based on his educational record, and needed to support his family now: if they could earn enough from farming, at least one younger sibling would be able to achieve a well-paid job in the city.

Ousmane's expectations relied on the assumption that the amount of secondary schooling he had completed would be enough to enter the formal labour market later. However, degree inflation in Benin eventually rendered that assumption flawed. In contrast, Yarou wanted to invest in this son's schooling as he had already completed more years than anybody else in the family. It is in this way that both engaged in a process of

decision making in an open-ended situation where it was unclear how Ousmane's decision to drop out of school would really influence his later life.

I again noticed the intensity of parental navigations and the high degree of openness in 2015, when Yarou's wife Bake asked me if I could help by supporting another of their sons, Abdoulaye, after he finished school. She repeated this request when I visited them again a year later and his final exams were approaching. At the time, I was the only person Bake knew who could advise on higher education, and so it was natural to her to ask me for help in navigating an unknown field. In fact, like parents elsewhere, she sought to maximize possible contacts to enhance her son's career prospects, even though she had no idea what concrete steps one had to follow in order to succeed.

In the event, Abdoulaye failed his exams and had to repeat the class. Four years later, his school career ended after a third unsuccessful attempt to pass the final exam and, since university was no longer a possibility, he asked his father to help him get into a private nursing school. His father agreed to pay his fees and he was admitted. However, after he had studied there for three years, a national educational reform in Benin invalidated degrees from most private schools, rendering this investment worthless. Abdoulaye had to return to the village where he joined the mother of his three-month-old baby, a former class-mate, whom Yarou and his wife had taken in. By that time Ousmane was managing his father's farm with the help of four other 'drop-out' brothers who also failed to find work in the city. A fifth brother also returned to agricultural work by establishing a separate household in another village.

Yarou and his wives' support of their children through education exemplify trajectories I have witnessed over 30 years among poor families from rural backgrounds in northern Benin. As the article will demonstrate, parental responsibilities and care obligations increased with changes in the eduscape[4] of Benin through a politics of 'Education for All'. Despite parental efforts, most children leave school early and among those who move into higher education, drop-out rates are also very high.[5]

In this article, I look at these processes, with a special focus on parenting in the context of wider intergenerational relationships. Young people's decisions about education and their paths through the eduscapes are regularly described using the idiom of navigation, but this can be employed with reference to parental engagements with education, too. The educational crisis is often characterized by terms like 'educated unemployment' (see Calvés and Schoumaker, 2004; Jeffery and Jeffery, 2010, Jeffrey, Jeffery and Jeffery, 2008). However, even if relationality and entanglements are claimed in these debates (Cooper and Pratten, 2015; Day, 2015; Dungey and Ansell, 2020; Schatz, 2007), research frequently focuses on the 'navigations' of individuals. After discussing hopes, aspirations and entangled navigations with regard to boys and girls, I will turn to asymmetrical parental responsibilities and how parental navigations are expressed locally through the metaphor of 'blindness'. To provide the historical background of the emergence of the eduscapes in Benin, I will start with a short overview of the history of schooling in northern Benin.

## Slowly overcoming the south–north divide: Schooling in Benin

Since schooling in the Western sense was introduced at the end of the 19th century, it has contributed to divergent futures for children in Dahomey, and later Benin. The first mission schools[6] were established during the French colonial period in what was then called Dahomey. Located exclusively in the south, they had a decisive influence on the colony's political history, as political elites who came to power after independence had been educated in these schools between 1900 and 1920 (Banégas, 2003: 40f). In Dahomey, as elsewhere, schooling was crucial for the colonial order, not only as a way to introduce colonial categories of difference and create racialized subjects, but also for the formation of an educated 'caste', who supported the colonial administration and were often referred to as *évolués* (Jézéquel, 2007). Apart from these administrators, colonial schooling devalued Indigenous populations excluded from schooling. Self-ascriptions of 'being blind', as many rural agriculturalists describe their own lack of knowledge, continue to reflect this divide to the present day.

Only a few years after the mission schools, the colonial state offered additional schools whose teachers were integrated into the civil service in the colony from 1906 (Bierschenk, 2014: 7). Schooling not only mirrored colonial hierarchies but also the north/south divide, with the northern region getting schools later, and fewer of them. The first school in northern Dahomey opened in Parakou in 1909.[7] Those disparities forced pupils from northern villages to go to boarding schools run by the colonial administration or missionaries in the south in order to be able to get jobs later, with the Church or the colonial state paying their fees.

The life trajectories of these very few northern pupils were very different from those of their siblings, and they often became extremely successful. After attending school, their way of life changed to become urban and middle-class, which distinguished them from others belonging to the same generation in their region of origin. As a result, they developed distinct residential patterns, and marital and family norms that were different from the practices their rural kin embraced (Alber, 2018: 159ff.). Those requiring especially high levels of education, like teachers, attended elite schools in Dakar, since no higher education was available in Dahomey. Jézéquel (2003) has shown that those students stemming from Dahomey who enrolled in one such school almost all came from an urban background, unlike their counterparts from Upper Volta or other colonies. By the time of independence in 1960, there was still no secondary school in northern Dahomey and more than 80% of a total of about 90,000 children were enrolled in schools in the south of the country (Asiwaju, 1975a, 1975b).

Independence in 1960 accelerated the spread of education and the extension of institutions beyond the south, while progress is still uneven. The national enrolment numbers increased rapidly, with 200,000 pupils enrolled in 1972 and 1 million in 1990 (Guinigo et al., 2001). By 2015, about 3 million pupils were enrolled (République du Bénin, 2018: 39), but in some parts of the north, children still did not attend school, even in 2005.

With the socialist government that ruled from 1972 to 1990, the roll-out of primary education became a priority and, for the first time, there was a state presence throughout

the country, which often took the form of schools and the rotation of teachers (Bierschenk and Olivier de Sardan, 2003), while private schools were banned (Tama, 2014: 24ff.). During this period, the first secondary schools and the first university opened in the north. Fees were also abolished and university students received a grant enabling them to live independently of their parents. In addition, every university graduate was offered state employment, while, until the late 1980s, a primary school certificate was enough to enter the police and the army, or even to become a primary school teacher oneself.

However, this policy of constant expansion of public services strained the national economy, and some have argued with Bierschenk (2014: 7) that, since Benin was already almost bankrupt when it gained independence, the political crisis in the late 1980s that led to the end of the socialist phase in 1990 partially stemmed from the expansion of state employment. In addition, of course, other factors, such as the immense debts owed to the World Bank, also contributed to the political crisis.

In the period leading up to independence and while the socialist government was in power, until 1990, schooling, although rejected by some, was generally seen as the main route to upward mobility.[8] Education promised access to state employment and membership in the urban elite; however, this path was only open to very few, and schooling remained largely unavailable to some communities in the rural areas and the north more generally.

The year 1987 was a turning point for schooling and education. In the midst of the national financial crisis, World Bank structural adjustment policies curbed the state's ability to hire all educated people for civil service jobs and raise salaries regularly, and thus undermined the 'postcolonial compromise' (Banégas, 2003: 76).

During the phase labelled 'democratic renewal', privatization and commodification changed the educational system and made it accessible for 'all', while austerity programmes were accompanied by efforts to invest in education (Banégas, 2003: 82; Igue and Soule, 1992: 77). In 2003, a first National Action Plan for the implementation of 'education for all' aimed to guarantee public primary education for every child throughout the country (Fichtner, 2012: 96ff.), and to construct public primary schools in almost every village. At the same time, a reduced workforce meant that schools hired temporary teachers on short-term contracts at much lower and less stable salaries, creating two classes of teachers (Tama, 2014).

Furthermore, as school budgets did not cover all salaries and schools were unable to hire enough staff, fees were reintroduced to make up for the deficit. Even as schools became more accessible in the countryside, the quality of teaching and teachers' salaries declined and the student/teacher ratio increased. These trends continued with a programme of building rural secondary schools that began in 2005.

Parallel to the expansion, and decreasing quality, of public education, and decreasing its quality, faith-based schools (Christian and Muslim) were founded. Education became a profitable business, so much so that in 2015 about 25% of pupils were enrolled in private schools (République du Bénin, 2018: 39).

It is in this climate that campaigns promoting 'education for all' – especially girls – targeted parents with slogans like '*toutes les filles à l'école*' ('every girl in school'). Such

campaigns have promoted a perception of education as a moral obligation and a child's right.

## Entangled navigations facing educational unemployment and uncertainty

Issaka was part of the first wave of educated young men whom the state did not hire once they finished their education. Born in 1964, before the primary school in Tebo opened, he was moved to live with his father's friend, a civil servant in a nearby town, so he could attend primary school. Here he finished secondary school and went on to study as a veterinary technician in Cuba.[9] When he returned to Benin five years later in 1987, he realized that political changes meant he would not get a position in the state system as he had expected. For the next nine months he desperately sought work in the de facto capital, Cotonou, in order not to return to his village empty-handed as the only person from the village who had ever reached that level of education, but had to give up. In our conversations in the early 1990s, he repeatedly told me that he could not understand why so much money had been invested in sending him to Cuba if he did not get any job afterwards.

Back in the village, where he resettled in the family compound, he became an important adviser to his uncle, the household and village head at that time, and besides working in the family fields, he gradually built up a private business offering vaccinations to local Fulani cattle herders. He complemented that activity with farming and became the first man in the village to use new technologies like tractors. In his own account, he recalled that after years of great frustration, he eventually made his living through his management capabilities and the experience he had gained 'outside' to become the richest farmer in Tebo. Fifteen years after his return, and ten years after founding his own family compound after marriage, he was hired to work in his initial profession on a development project with a friend who had also been educated in Cuba and then, finally, by the state. His father had always supported him, first by finding a place to study and then by using connections to get him a grant.

In hindsight, this investment was worthwhile. Issaka's education in Cuba provided him with the necessary diploma as well as the contacts and knowledge to support himself, even when he was officially unemployed. However, while he expressed his frustration about his lack of initial success in seeking a position, his father emphasized in interviews how much he had invested in this son. He was even more upset than Issaka and had continued throughout to try to persuade Issaka's former host in the city to support his son further by using his contacts.

Issaka's professional life trajectory is not uncommon, but a large majority of similar cases do not end nearly as well. Among others Jeffery and Jeffery (2010) in their work on India, have termed this 'educated unemployment', which is found across regions in the global South (see Donner, 2023, this volume), but is increasingly spreading across the global North as well (see Narotzky and Goddard, 2017), where formal positions are no longer available. Issaka had managed to make a living in agriculture, which he combined with providing veterinary services privately. His biography demonstrates that the

phenomenon of educated unemployment, which had been raised as an issue already after independence (Callaway, 1963), is anything but new. However, it has become a serious and pervasive problem in many countries in Africa following the introduction of neo-liberal economics at the end of the 20th century (see Abebe, 2020; Calvés and Schoumaker, 2004; Dawson, 2014; Häberlein and Maurus, 2020; Mains, 2011; Maxwell, 1998; Roth, 1998; Stasik, 2016). As for Issaka, the problem for him was not only the question of how to earn a living and become independent from parental support (Roth, 2008), but also how to build his self-esteem and fulfil ideals of masculinity (Jeffrey et al., 2008; Masquelier, 2013), often expressed in terms of 'becoming serious' (Cooper, 2017), and to successfully move into adult roles.

While Issaka ended up as one of the most successful men from Tebo, unlike Yarou's sons, his experience illustrates that the most successful children from rural backgrounds depend on finding positions in urban labour markets. This has become even more difficult today, since, due to demographic change as well as the increasing numbers of enrolments, the number of educated young adults competing in the limited formal labour markets is constantly rising.

At the same time, many children drop out before completing primary school; others leave secondary school, or are not admitted to a university after graduating and cannot be classified as educated unemployed.

But contrary to what Jeffrey et al. (2008) have stated for India, and others have called 'waithood' (Honwana, 2012; Prothman, 2019) or even 'boredom' (Masquelier, 2013), Issaka as well as Yarou's sons and others are constantly engaged in activities that can be described as 'hustling', or 'navigating' (Christiansen et al., 2006), in a constantly changing environment of open-endedness and contingency (Bledsoe, 2002). This way of actively seeking and building futures under uncertain, open and changing conditions has also been called a source of possibility (Häberlein and Maurus, 2020; Martin et al., 2016; Stambach and Hull, 2017). At the same time, conversations with Issaka and his father also demonstrate that even when hustling and actively seeking possibilities to work in his profession, as Issaka did, and even when creatively navigating how to support his son, as in the case of his father, both described the time of openness as a situation of waiting and a slowed-down process of finding ways to make one's living after having finished education. Thus the subjective experience and memory of the time of hustling might be perceived as a moment of 'waiting', and the open-endedness might subjectively not feel primarily 'open' but highly difficult and full of constraints and limitations.

Key to Issaka's success were social networks, starting with his father's, that allowed him to attend school and to gain access to funding by placing him with an influential foster father. This man helped Issaka to find the grant to study in Cuba, where he met the friends who helped him find the development position 15 years later. Even his private business of offering vaccination services to cattle herders was built upon the relationships between farmers and herders he had grown up with in the village, as his family compound was an important meeting point of cattle herders when visiting the village to do business with agriculturalists. Even less entrepreneurial or less qualified individuals largely relied on their kin's connections, when seeking jobs like working as a taxi driver when leaving the Quranic school, as one of Yarou´s sons did.

While the literature has largely acknowledged the importance of relationships (for instance, Cooper and Pratten, 2015; Day, 2015), concrete case studies, as well as the metaphor of young people's navigations towards an uncertain future horizon, still often focus on individual trajectories. However, important turning points in vital conjunctures (Johnson-Hanks, 2006), such as deciding what to do about pregnancy during school, or what to study and where and how, never concern individuals alone but also mothers (Ringsted, 2008), fathers and siblings (Coe, 2013; Thelen et al., 2013), and other kin (Alber, 2023b). In fact, the importance of linked or interdependent lives (Elder, 1994) and the orchestration of lifetimes (Coe, 2015), which is generally acknowledged in reflections on life courses (Ehmer and Lentz, 2023), is crucial for understanding the life trajectories of individuals, as the examples in this article demonstrate.

Based on the findings presented here, I will now focus on parenting and argue that the navigations of adolescent youths from rural backgrounds in northern Benin cannot be fully understood without looking at their entanglements with their parents' own explorations of different possibilities.

## Uneven entangled navigations and parenting

Parenting has been understood as 'social reproduction' (Goody, 1982), which has also been discussed as a means of future-making. This understanding implies that parenting is not just a relationship between individuals but an activity that relates children, parents and society under changing circumstances, and can also be divided among multiple parental actors, for instance foster parents and birth parents (Alber, 2023a). It is shaped by the task and responsibility of building the next generation, in a double sense of familiar and societal generations.[10]

Yarou addressed the temporal dimension of future-making when he compared parenting to a hunter who kept on walking to avoid missing any future chance to kill game. In that conversation he emphasized the need to persevere in supporting a child's education in the hope for a better or different future. Furthermore, he raised this specific temporality of parenting using a metaphor of an unequal relationship, in which the hunter (parent) is acting and the game (a child's success) is subject to the action of hunting. Of course, this is only one of many ways parents' and children's agency intertwine, and does not take into account power relations between the generations. But I would like to focus on the highly uneven understandings of the role of investment in education, which I think is worth considering as part of a more complex intergenerational temporality.

Intergenerational relationships between parents and children have often been conceptualized as shaped by mutuality and reciprocity. One popular and widespread idea is that of an intergenerational contract, in which children are expected to give back to their parents what they received from them. This idea, which is not, as is often assumed, a Western construct as such (Donner, 2005), emphasizes balance and reciprocity over time and also implies that parents owe their children what they received from their own parents, and that adult children owe their ageing parents what they gave to the previous generation. As Häberlein (2018) argues, this idea is important for intergenerational relations in Benin and Togo, in which adult children have the moral obligation to care for their elderly

parents. Indeed, this idea also shapes families, households and marital decision-making processes in the region of my research, where few elders are eligible for social security and the large majority require support from their children in the later phases of their lives. But here as elsewhere, the idea of intergenerational reciprocity also justifies practices in which parental investment in children is required. And parents themselves are subject to this in the form of neoliberal state-sponsored 'familialism'. For example, campaigns for schooling stress that the future of the nation depends on parents' contribution to the intergenerational contract by supporting their children's educational careers, regardless of whether or not parents who have to pay received such support themselves. In fact, the common notion of parenting as reciprocity and mutuality over time does not take account of major asymmetries that are due to the specific temporality of intergenerational relations. Conceptualized as 'lifetimes intertwined' (Whyte et al., 2008), these relations are shaped by the truism that parents and children neither share the same generational experiences nor grow up in similar circumstances. On the contrary, every generation of parents copes with different challenges and with them different expectations regarding their responsibilities as parents.

Others have also pointed to another field in which parenting appears to be asymmetrical. Marilyn Strathern (2011: 246) sees asymmetries as grounded in processes of knowledge about who is the parent, whereas she sees the child itself as a 'fact'. Thus, not only might parental responsibilities change over time, so too do the individual and societal acknowledgement of who *is* the parent and what responsibilities are related to the acknowledgement of parenthood. In any case, the inescapable temporality of different lifetimes related to parenting, and the acknowledgement of parenthood, situates parent–child relations in overlapping but not synchronized lifespans. It is in these that the parental work of future-building takes place.

When looking at Yarou's intensive search for life chances for his sons and daughters, it is helpful to situate his navigations in the new intergenerational asymmetries that emerged through schooling and the increased expectations placed on parents. Even if an idea of mutuality and equalness in reciprocity shapes parental self-understandings, it must be acknowledged that Yarou had never been provided with similar support to that he offers his own children. Unlike his own parents, he supports them in building urban futures that are radically different from his own. And if that outcome fails to come about, he regrets that his children were unable to more profoundly overcome what he calls his *blindness*, deriving from his own lifeworld.

Yarou's children's school careers are relational navigations based on the different generational experiences of both parents and children. Parental moralities of care, support and responsibility are specifically grounded in their time, and here the decline of reliable educational offers and career possibilities in the nation state of Benin becomes relevant. In addition, the 'education for all' campaigns at the beginning of the millennium, with their moral emphasis on parental responsibilities, profoundly reshaped parental moralities of intergenerational care. These campaigns' deep influence on children's educational trajectories, and even deeper influence on the moralities of appropriate parenting, had important consequences for the family economy and, as will be shown, for other parental

responsibilities like marriage and bride price payments. This becomes obvious when looking at a mother's perspectives on girls' paths.

## Girls' trajectories

When talking with Dado, a woman in the village of Tebo, about the schooling careers of her daughters in July 2019, she said: 'Whatever happens, nobody should be able to say that my life is like that because they did not send me to school' (translation from Baatonum: Erdmute Alber). I understood how deeply she worried that she might be blamed one day for her daughters' lack of careers by not having sufficiently supported their education. Their trajectories were just as typical for girls as those of Yarou's sons were for boys, but differed due to the worry they might drop out due to falling pregnant in their teens. Dado shared Yarou's deep conviction that today there is no alternative to sending one's children to school, and she insisted that none of her children would ever be able to blame her for not sending them to school. In making this claim, she also drew on her generational experience, as during her childhood only a few selected children, mainly boys, attended school, which often resulted in upward social mobility, though siblings often felt left out. They sometimes later regretted not attending school, or blamed their parents[11] for not having been enabled to shine, at least when speaking with outsiders like me. Dado definitely intended to prevent such regrets for her children, but had not sent her two oldest daughters, born in the 1980s and fostered by relatives as was then common at the time, to school.

The third girl, Falli, was born in 1992 and was the first girl in the family to be enrolled in school. She was a promising pupil and after finishing primary school in Tebo she continued at the new secondary school in Biro, about 30 km away, where she lived with her great aunt. Although she failed the BEPC examination[12] four years later, her mother strongly encouraged her to continue her education. However, Falli decided to move in with her boyfriend's family in another city and took a two-year course to become a nursing assistant. Although this move was seen as an engagement, making her the responsibility of her affines, Dado kept paying for her daughter's tuition as she saw education as enabling her daughter to break up with the young man if she wanted to. After finishing her training, Falli worked in a village health centre, became pregnant, then separated and sent the child to live with Dado in Tebo before having more children with her new partner. Dado's other daughter followed the same trajectory of primary school in Tebo and secondary school in the neighbouring village, where she soon became pregnant. However, Dado told me sadly that the boy's mother refused to support them, claiming that it was not her problem that her son had impregnated the girl. Therefore, Dado decided that she should have an abortion – a difficult decision, but Dado considered the financial situation unmanageable as she and her husband could not afford to support a baby and pay more school fees.

Some time later, the daughter got pregnant by another young man, whose parents took responsibility for the engagement and paid the bride price as well as the wedding expenses, medical costs and Dado's daughter's apprenticeship.

Dado also raised a sister, who was 20 years younger than she was, and whom she took in when she reached school age – in part to make sure that the girl was enrolled. When the sister finished primary school, Dado found her a place in a small public boarding school providing girls from rural backgrounds with secondary education. However, this young woman dropped out after she fell pregnant and became a seamstress with the help of her affines.

Dado expressed some disappointment – these were not the careers she had expected for her daughters – but she was at least content that her daughter and sister were recognized and provided with apprenticeships by their in-laws. However she was frustrated by the prevalence of pregnancies cutting girls' educational careers short, which she related to parental poverty (see also Donner, this volume). In her view, as parents were not able to spend enough on their children, young women entered relationships in order to access money and gifts – which then led to pregnancies.

In her mind this was also related to the practice of placing children in the households of others – often necessary to enable secondary schooling – because, while she paid for contraceptives she could not control her daughters' social lives when they were not at home.

Teenage pregnancies have been a major topic in the literature on gender and educational trajectories in the region since the second half of the 20th century (Akuffo, 1989; Cole, 2004; Dunne, 2007; Johnson-Hanks, 2002, 2006; Keller et al., 1999; Mensch et al., 2001; Newman, 2020, 2021; Varga, 2002). In many African contexts, pregnant girls are forbidden to attend school (see Kwayu, 2024, for Tanzania), though there is no legal requirement to exclude them, and I am not aware of any cases where a young pregnant woman continued schooling in rural northern Benin or returned to the classroom after giving birth. While there may be different reasons for this, it seems that Dado's daughters' choices of either getting an abortion and continuing school or getting married and giving birth represented the only socially accepted ways of dealing with these 'vital conjunctures' (Johnson-Hanks, 2002, 2006). While these conjunctures differ according to gender, parents, and especially mothers, routinely pay for contraceptives and abortions in addition to school fees, in the hope daughters will marry and find a position.

## Increased parental obligations and parents' blindness

Yarou's and Dado's aspirations and actions are typical of parents of their generation. Each had both daughters and sons, and each paid not only for abortions for their daughters but also apprenticeships for their sons' girlfriends who got pregnant when still attending school. Thus, pregnancy disrupts the education of both young women and men, but with different outcomes, and results in conflicts, as shown in the cases described earlier.

Thus, the roll-out of educational provision across the country furthered an intergenerational understanding that the right to schooling implies that parents have a moral obligation to pay for their children's education. Parents are also covering costs that arise from sons' and daughters' reproductive decisions while they are pupils, including the removal of obstacles to the education of young women by providing contraceptives and abortions, as well as the costs of supporting a son's pregnant partner with a view to

marriage, and paying the expenses of hospitalized childbirth. As school fees increased with the 'education for all' campaigns, they were at that time seen as the main parental contribution to enable a child to transition into adulthood, especially since the expectation was that they would migrate to urban areas and earn their own funds for a wedding. In that transitional period, such payments of fees substituted for marriage expenditure and it was generally understood that children could not expect their parents to pay for both. However, more recently, and in contrast to expectations in the last decades of the 20th century, many students in rural secondary schools, including almost all the girls, drop out of schools, often due to pregnancy. Parents are therefore increasingly forced to invest not only in schooling as such but, years later, in marriage, birth and childcare. Affines of young women are also expected to provide an apprenticeship for their son's prospective wife.

Along with changing responsibilities, globalized ideologies of educational attainment have given rise to immense aspirations for children's future lives, thus Yarou and Dado hoped for careers to follow from successfully completing education. These aspirations sit alongside other asymmetries in intergenerational relationships also resulting from the temporality of futurity. One metaphor that came up in almost all conversations was that parents wanted to prevent 'blindness' through schooling, often expressed in terms of an intergenerational marker of difference, as when parents stated 'We are blind, our children should see.'

Given the importance of 'blindness' in narratives of parental involvement in schooling, it is crucial to unpack the local meanings of the metaphor.

Reference to 'blindness' articulates a parental inability to offer competent advice for a child's future path, an inability that stems from parental lack of experience in contexts other than the village and employment in agriculture. One dimension is not having learned to read and write, but 'blind' means more: it includes peasants' exclusion from cultural and social capital, such as speaking 'proper' French, their not having contacts in urban areas, and their lack of knowledge relevant to the reproduction of nationalist imageries of success. Yarou, for instance, claimed his being 'blind' as the reason for him sending one of his sons to an unaccredited nursing school. Thus he had behaved like somebody who did not enact the 'common sense' shared across Benin. Overcoming blindness was the most frequent desire that parents expressed when speaking to me about their aspirations that the children should one day live in a different environment than themselves. In this way, they shoulder the responsibility for their children's trajectories almost exclusively. Many parents also told me that they knew that children needed the connections, networks and knowledge of urban life that they lacked in order to realize their educational careers. However, this 'blindness' also relates parents and children in multiple ways: children feel that they should succeed in town because parents expect and wish them to do so, and feel that they need to learn to read and write in order to help their parents. And, finally, the notion of having overcome 'blindness' by trying to become somebody in the cities is an aspiration that would not be fully understood without the image of the 'blind' but nevertheless navigating parents who seek to open out their children's paths.

## Conclusion

In this article, I outlined the often-overlooked role of parents in the difficult pathways of rural children through changing eduscapes in northern Benin. Parents are deeply involved in their children's trajectories towards making a living through providing the care and support they see themselves as responsible for. A neoliberal and increasingly privatized schooling system that creates unequal chances, in combination with the demand of 'Education for all', responsibilizes parents for their children's success, and a difficult labour market makes it more difficult for youth to find positions in the urban space. In consequence, parents are investing in their children's education and related costs more intensively than ever before, without feeling that these investments lead to what parents value as success.

Due to the lack of parental experience in the neoliberal eduscapes and the lack of cultural and social capital – which parents describe as 'blindness' – parental actions in the eduscapes could best be described as navigations which are entangled with those of their children. In these navigations, parents give their children what they never received from their own parents, but also expect or hope they will become what they never were: urban citizens, if at all possible; that is, those who are seen as no longer 'blind'. Thus, as children navigate towards an unknown and uncertain future, parents also navigate in 'radical openness' (Simone, 2021).

These navigations in openness cannot be described as 'waithood' (Honwana, 2012; Prothman, 2019) or 'boredom' (Masquelier, 2013), even if they often imply waiting for possibilities or chances, or that the trajectories towards adulthood sometimes take a long time. They nevertheless imply hustling and checking and, as can be seen with regard to concrete biographies, the constant search in uncertain and changing conditions of openness. This has been called a source of possibility (Martin et al., 2016; Stambach and Hull, 2017; Häberlein and Maurus, 2020).

Elizabeth Cooper and David Pratten (2015: 2) have taken this argument one step further in claiming that uncertainty and openness might even sometimes be highly 'productive'. But, in any case, it necessitates constantly making arrangements within the given circumstances, characterized by difficult economic conditions and highly unequal chances, which make it very difficult for rural children to gain access to the envisaged and desired formal labour market. This openness and these circumstances imply constant involvement with others, and relatedness with people and spaces that could provide a chance. As Cooper and Pratten (2015: 2) put it, 'in some situations social relations create uncertainty, while at other times social relations alleviate uncertainty, and often the equilibrium is held in suspense'.

Putting emphasis on parental actions in children's trajectories through the eduscapes creates awareness of entanglements in their life courses, which Glenn Elder has referred to as 'interdependent lives'. Elder (1994: 5) even argued that 'no principle of the life course is more central than the notion of interdependent lives'. While this is largely theoretically acknowledged, it is not always realized in analysing biographical trajectories. However, children's educational trajectories are an excellent example of the entanglement of life courses, as Donner (2005) also demonstrates when arguing how full family life, and

parental as well as grandparental engagement in households, is reorganized towards the aim of giving children formal education in Calcutta.

In these trajectories, children's navigations should be conceptualized not only as deeply entangled with those of their parents, but also those of their teachers, as Dungey and Ansell (2020) argue, or those of their peers (Abebe, 2020). In addition, while emerging in local eduscapes, they should be seen as deeply shaped by globally circulating narratives of a good education and the related policies.

Processes of decision making in eduscapes in Cameroon have been beautifully described by Jennifer Johnson-Hanks (2002, 2006), who puts an emphasis on openness and potentiality as well as the entanglements with pregnancies and reproductive decisions. She calls them 'vital conjunctures' and argues: 'The analytic concept of the vital conjuncture refers to a socially structured zone of possibility that emerges around specific periods of potential transformation in a life or lives. It is a temporary configuration of possible change, a duration of uncertainty and potential' (2002: 871). As I have argued elsewhere (Alber, 2023b), the concept of vital conjunctures should also be understood as produced in entanglement: girls' trajectories are decided and made, not only by themselves, but also with the strong involvement of others, especially their mothers, whose life paths also often change when, for instance, they take in their grandchildren (Ringsted, 2008) in order to enable their daughters to continue schooling.

My findings also confirm Newman's (2020, 2021) critique of a literature that often frames becoming pregnant while in school merely as 'teenage pregnancy', de-emphasizing the girls' agency. Pregnancies and the consequent decisions over marriages can also be seen as expressions of agency by acknowledging that marriage is seen by both parents and children as an important step in everybody's life. For instance, Falli's first relationship offered her an opportunity to move to the in-laws' household and continue her studies in nursing. In Newman's (2021) words, such navigations could also be read as an attempt to realize 'the best of both worlds' under precarious conditions. Even in this step, her mother was intensively involved: by paying for nursing school, she opened a pathway along which her daughter could later get out of that relationship.

In any case, pregnancies, marriage and parenting cannot be seen as separate or even separable from the eduscape, as politicians try to argue when forbidding girls to continue schooling when they become pregnant. Even in these cases, complicated, entangled processes of decision making are taking place which relate pregnancies to schooling and the eduscapes framed by neoliberal educational politics. Sexuality does not start after schooling; to the contrary, students experience sexual encounters during their schooling trajectories and often in the physical spaces and infrastructures of school buildings. They are part of the neoliberal eduscapes of today.

Parental support, care and advice in relation to their children's educational trajectories, and the mentioned entanglements with children's own navigations, also include navigations and decisions about pregnancy and parenting, and these are seen as part of complicated life paths with concrete problems and dilemmas for which solutions have to be found. Parents and children are related through aspirations and hopes, fears and doubts, lack of resources, and attempts to overcome assumed blindness, but also through pregnancies and the question of who cares for the child, who pays the bride price, or how

to abort; while children's trajectories are shaped and made by parental care and support, they are also made and shaped by its lack, often due to the lack of resources. These entangled navigations can be conceptualized as parenting, which I understand as inextricably uneven and often even asymmetrical in the sense that parents do not at all give their children what they received from their parents. The precarity in openness observed here with regard to parents and children from rural Benin is strongly influenced by neoliberal and highly unequal educational politics. The hunter Yarou uses as a metaphor to describe his own actions, cannot substantially improve his chances, as long as the deer is too rare to find.

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## Notes

1. I have known Yarou and the other interlocutors I cite since 1992, when I did my first fieldwork in Tebo. I have since been able to follow their life trajectories and became a kind of family member to them.
2. Concerning the concept of uncertaincy, see Hänsch et al. (2017).
3. Yarou married four times and fathered more than 20 children, of whom 10 were still living.
4. With the term *eduscape* I am referring conceptually to Appadurai´s (1996) notion of different scapes that constitute what he called 'cultural dimensions of globalisation'. Like Forsey (2020),

who also uses the concept of eduscape to name local configurations in a concrete area, I see various actors as relationally co-producing the configuration I call the eduscape, among them schools and educational institutions, parents, pupils and other kin, but also global flows of ideas about education and related economies.

5. There are no official data, but Clarisse Tama, Dean of the Faculty of Social Sciences at the University of Parakou, referred to the high drop-out rates among children with rural backgrounds as 'alarming' (personal communication, March 2023).

6. On colonial mission schools in Dahomey see Bohr (1984).

7. Archives Nationales du Bénin, 26, Rapport Mensuel Trimestriel, Borgou, May 1910.

8. Jézéquel (2003) convincingly argued that schooling was not generally rejected during colonialism by all. Some saw it as a chance to rise socially, while others avoided engagement.

9. During the socialist era it was common for students from Benin to attend Cuban universities and technical schools, especially to study medicine and veterinary science.

10. On the argument for parenting and reproduction as processes of future-making, see Thelen and Alber (2022: 18ff.).

11. In public, parent–child relationships in Benin are mostly highly respectful. Even adult children will normally only criticize their parents for not having sent them to school in private.

12. The '*brévet d'études du premier cycle du second degré*' (BEPC) qualification in Francophone countries follows six years of primary and four years of secondary school and is required for many professions and training schools. The baccalauréat, the high school diploma, requires two further years of study and a final exam year.

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