Madrasas or Privately Funded Islamic Faith-Based Schools in Mali and Issues of Social Justice

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SPECIAL SERIES
the Privatisation in Education Research Initiative

2012 No. 41
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The changing dynamics of education in most countries over the last thirty years obscures an understanding of how the requirements of human rights and economic and social justice are to be met under the new and increasingly pervasive conditions of private, public and private-public provision in education. The Privatisation in Education Research Initiative (PERI) is a multi-annual global initiative supported by the Education Support Program of the Open Society Foundations that seeks to contribute to a better understanding on whether, through what mechanisms, with what outcomes, and for whom the increasing adoption of a widening range educational service regulation and delivery mechanisms might lead to more effective and equitable education systems.

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- Develop research capacity – by providing opportunity for educational researchers to conduct and learn about educational policy analysis and by creating sustained networking opportunities among themselves internationally.

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Abstract

The study’s purpose is to provide a critical analysis of how madrasas, as privately-funded, Islamic teaching institutions in Mali, struggle to cope with social injustices in the face of what may be perceived as false assumptions and dubious government policies and practices. It is also the researcher’s intent to bring to light how these perceived injustices affect students who attend madrasas in terms of their academic performance as well as their social and professional integration into Malian society. Finally, this study explores the extent to which the intersection of religion, politics and schooling in education affects the relationship between policymakers and the constituents they are expected to serve (Alemán 2006).

Eight focus groups were interviewed for this study. Each focus group did not exceed 10 participants. The interview data were analyzed based on Miles and Huberman’s (1994) as well as Strauss and Corbin’s (1998) analytical procedures. The first procedure consisted of audiotaping, transcribing, and codifying the field notes into specific terms, concepts, and categories to identify “the set that fits” (Miles and Huberman 1994). Furthermore, some major themes emerging from the analysis were the benefits of madrasas and parental involvement, issues of equity, adequate funding, and employment opportunities for madrasa graduates.
1. Introduction

In recent years, debates among scholars, policymakers, practitioners, and consumers of education have been characterised increasingly by their mutual frustration at seeing society invest tremendous amounts of resources into public educational systems without always achieving better outcomes (Mizala and Romaguera 2000). Consequently, as concerns over the low quality of public education continue to grow, the demands for private schools as substitutes or alternatives for public schools have increased (DeStefano et al. 2006; Edwards, Fitz and Whitty 1985; Hoxby 1994; McEwan and Carnoy 2000; Starr 1987).

In Mali, for instance, private schools, including madrasas, have been created with the intent to provide access to low-cost, quality basic education, mainly to the rural populations. Quality education, in this context, is measured by higher enrollment rates, improved student literacy and academic achievement, increased high school graduation rates, higher wages, and better post-graduation lives (Alexander and Pallas, 1985; Coleman, Hoffer and Kilgore, 1982; Feinstein and Symons 1999; Fielden and LaRoque 2008; Hoffer, Greeley and Coleman 1985; Jimenez, Lockheed and Paqueo 1991; McEwan and Carnoy 2000; Noell 1982).

Historically, madrasas in Mali were created as religious schools intended to teach and disseminate the beliefs and principles of Islam (Bilhan et al. 2007 Brenner 2001). As such, the fundamental goal of those Qur’anic schools, as they were called, was to provide children with the moral, social and spiritual preparation they would need to fully integrate into society. But, on 30 April 1985, the mission of madrasas shifted when the government issued Decree No. 112/PG-RM, which placed them under the control of the Ministry of Education (MoE). The main objective of such a decision, according to government officials, was to reorganize these institutions and enable them to meet the standards of modern schools. Furthermore, on 15 August 1994, the government issued Decree No. 94/276/P-RM, which specifically classified madrasas under the category of independent private schools (Brenner 2007). This meant that they were autonomously run for profit by private entrepreneurs and would rely on student fees to survive.

From a policy standpoint, one could argue that madrasas in Mali have been created to respond, in a meaningful and sustainable way, to the needs of learners and communities. In other words, the creation of madrasas can be viewed as the means to achieve the social policy goals of equity and social justice intended by the government’s reform initiatives (Glassman and Millogo 2003; Hoppers 2005; Miller-Granvaux and Yoder 2002; Mundy, Haggerty, Cherry, Maclure and Sivasubramaniam 2007).

Moreover, Crain, Heebner and Si (1992) and Gamoran (1996) contended that private schools offer better conditions, which accounts for higher educational attainment. These include a good academic climate, the types of courses students take, and the high standards set for academic work. Hoxby (2004) conducted a similar study in which she examined the differences in achievement between students in charter schools and students in regular schools, as measured by the National Assessment Educational Progress (NAEP) of fourth graders in the United States. She found that students who had stayed longer in charter schools were more likely to display a higher proficiency rate in math and reading than their counterparts in corresponding public schools. Furthermore, a growing perception exists that privatizing public schools opens the door to more competition, thus motivating educators to improve approaches to schooling by revising and updating their practices as well as framing the contents of their curricula.
to better meet the specific needs of their students (Borland and Howen 1996; Cough, William and Williams 1993; Dee 1998; Hoxby 1994).

In many developing countries, however, private schools do not receive the financial support needed from their national governments to provide the quality of education necessary for any significant improvement in student learning (Gallagher 1993; James 1993).

Despite the fact that madrasas are independent, private for-profit schools, they need some form of state financial support to supplement their limited own-source income, because most of these institutions (in both rural and urban areas) operate in under-served, low-income communities. As such, without the government’s commitment in terms of appropriate financial assistance, it can be difficult for them to hire and retain qualified teachers or afford the appropriate equipment and infrastructure needed to offer quality education to students.

The debate over whether or not the state should fund private schools is not new (Shapiro 1986 Walford 2001). As Walford pointed out:

[A]dvocates for the state support commonly base their arguments on the perceived need for greater diversity of provision, the assumed greater efficiency and effectiveness of the private sector and the simple right of parents to have their children educated in the schools of their choosing. (p. 360)

Walford argues that some advocates perceive government support of the private sector through targeted schemes as a means of creating both ethnic and class equality. Some scholars view government funding of private schools as providing a) efficiency (Mehrotra 2004; Walford 2001), b) equity and c) social justice (Alemán 2007).

In the case of Mali, it could be argued that the government gains more than it loses by subsidizing private schools. With the increase in the student population every year and the alarming shortage of classrooms in the public sector, it is almost impossible for public schools alone to educate children. Consequently, to reduce the sizes of classrooms in public schools and increase the enrollment rates, it is imperative that the government get the private sector involved in schooling. One way to stimulate the involvement of private schools may be through financial assistance. This can be provided in the form of subsidies to these institutions, grants, low-interest loans, and tax exemptions (Levy 1982; Murnane and Levy 1996; Thomas and Bullock 1992).

1.1 Purpose of the study

The study’s purpose is to provide a critical analysis of how madrasas, as privately funded, Islamic teaching institutions in Mali, struggle to cope with social injustices in the face of what may be perceived as false assumptions and dubious government policies and practices. Policies and practices in this context are essentially concerned with the imposition of a national curriculum and national testing, methods of teaching, inspection and interventions into pedagogical decision making by the government (Ball 1993). It is also the researcher’s intent to bring to light how these injustices affect students who attend madrasas in terms of their academic performance as well as their social and professional integration into the Malian society. Finally, this study explores the extent to which the intersection of religion, politics and schooling in education affects the relationship between policymakers and the constituents they are expected to serve (Alemán, 2006).
1.2 Research questions

1) What do parents of students who attend madrasas perceive as the primary benefits of their children's schools compared to other education alternatives?
2) How do parents of students who attend madrasas describe their involvement with these schools?
3) What compels teachers and school leaders of madrasas to devote their professional lives to such institutions despite possible risks to their own social aspirations and mobility?
4) What barriers or challenges to social justice are perceived by the constituents, patrons and regulators of madrasas in Mali?
5) How do graduates of madrasas perform on government service examinations as compared to students who matriculate from public schools in Mali?
6) How do graduates of madrasas describe their attempts to enter the broader Malian society (e.g., opportunities for employment and post-secondary education)?

2. Background and Context

Beginning in the early 1980s, policies of stabilization and structural adjustment programs were imposed on Mali's government by the World Bank (WB) and the International Monetary Fund (IMF) (Ridell 1992). Amongst other aims, the policies were intended to promote privatization and deregulation of public schools. Mali's education system experienced drastic transformations as a result (Gutelius 2007). These transformations were characterized by a massive departure of qualified teachers into early retirement, and subsequent governments became more dependent on foreign aid to support the education sector. This was also due, in part, to a fragile national economy influenced by external factors, including scarce rainfall, price fluctuations of commodities such as cotton, which is one of Mali's main exports, and political upheavals.

A report by the United Nations Development Program (2009) described a 26.2 percent literacy rate in Mali, the lowest among the 180 countries studied. Public schooling in Mali continues to face numerous hurdles such as low student achievement and high dropout rates; thus private schools such as madrasas have become alternatives for many parents and their school-age children.

Recent decades have witnessed an expansion of madrasas in Mali (Gutelius 2007). The Cellule de Planification et Statistique (2007) reported that from 1990 to 2007 there were 1,992 madrasas built across the country, enrolling 266,273 primary- and middle-school students. Subsequently, 8,862 teachers were employed by those schools. In Mali, madrasas now account for a quarter of the children in primary schools; 46 percent are girls. Primary school children's ages range from 7 to 12 (Bilhan et al. 2006; Dalrymple 2006; Pearce, Fourmy and Kovach 2007). To some observers, this would appear to promote social change by helping the country achieve its Millennium Development Goal to provide

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1 The Malian government organizes competitions or examinations every year among the graduates of technical and professional schools as well as those from higher education institutions to recruit civil servants in different areas of the administration. That makes the Malian model of recruitment different from the one used by many Western countries, where candidates go through an interview process to be hired.
equal access to primary education for a majority of children by 2015 (UNESCO 2006), as well as the related “Education for All” (EFA) initiative (UNESCO 2000).

Two factors may explain the rapid growth of madrasas in Mali. First, Mali is a country which has a long history of Islamic schooling and instruction. The majority of the population identify themselves as Muslims (Braton 2003; Kane et al. 1998; Soares 2005). Many parents send their children to madrasas to receive Islamic education that they deem important to the spiritual health and stability of their children and the society. Students who succeed in memorizing the Qu’ran and learning to interpret religious literature and history in such institutions are considered role models by many Malians. In most cases, when these individuals graduate from madrasas, they are appointed as imams in their communities (Niezen 1990).

The second reason is has to do with location. Madrasas are attended mainly by students who are poor. Many public schools, especially those in rural areas, are located miles away from most of the children’s homes and communities. Therefore, parents who want to send their children to those public schools have two choices: either they pay transport fees, which many cannot afford, or they have to let their children walk long distances to school.

Madrasas are also less expensive, another crucial factor in parents’ school choices.

2.1 Inequality in policies and distribution of resources: the status of madrasas in Mali

The lack of access to school funding and services, the insufficient entry into higher education by high school graduates, and the dearth of opportunities for many post-secondary graduates to enter the workplace are limitations faced by many Malians (Brenner 2001). Despite the efforts of the first independent government of Mali to distance itself from the colonial schooling mentality by attempting to provide an education that was more “Malian centric,” the contents of the curricula and the way courses are dispensed are still similar to the approaches used to convey knowledge during the colonial period (Brenner 2007). Even though the rhetoric of Mali’s political leadership exclaimed the extension of educational opportunities to 95 percent of its citizens by 2015 (UNESCO 2006), in practice, little seems to have changed. By all accounts, even though the number of formally schooled children has grown, the actual level of learning had declined quite considerably.

The first madrasas were created in Mali during the late 1940s, but, according to Brenner (2007), the French (i.e. Mali’s “colonial masters”) were strongly opposed to madrasa schooling for two reasons. They viewed madrasas as incubators of Wahhabi radicalism, intent on indoctrinating young people to become political and religious activists, which, in the long run, would have threatened French authority. Second, the use of the Arabic language, the medium of instruction in madrasas, was considered insidious and unacceptable to the French officials (Brenner 2001).

When examining the attitudes of subsequent post-colonial governments regarding madrasas in Mali, it can be clearly seen that the officials operated from an ideological position similar to their former colonial predecessor. After several failed attempts to suppress madrasas, various governments resolved finally to marginalize them in subtle as well as fundamental ways (Brenner 2007). For example, in an effort to secularize the teaching and learning in madrasas, the government on several occasions tried to do away with the teaching of religion as a subject in madrasas. The measure failed because it was met with resistance from all the constituents of madrasas (i.e. students, graduates,
parents, teachers, administrators, and community members). The underlying logic behind the government efforts to suppress Islamic faith-based schools could be explained by political leaders who were concerned that if the madrasas were not monitored, they would be used as platforms to spread notions of normative Islamic practices and beliefs that could challenge the government’s authority (Gutelius 2007; Schultz 2003).

From the government’s perspective, one way to control madrasas was to regularize their curricula and methods of teaching. In fact, since 1985, madrasas have been required to “modernize” their instruction by following national education norms and standards. Accordingly, textbooks used in madrasas were revised and adapted to match those of public schools. Another tool used by the government to “subjugate” madrasas is the requirement that their high school graduates take college entrance examinations, a practice not required of students who matriculate at public schools. Moreover, the tests are written in French, which is taught as a second language in madrasas (Arabic is the first language).

Finally, even if madrasa students graduate from college, their chances of getting a job in Mali are somewhat limited (Brenner 2001). Bilhan et al. (2007) seem to reinforce this idea when they mention that despite the fact that madrasas contribute tremendously to the improvement of the school enrollment rates in Mali, they do not seem to fully prepare their graduates for a professional life. In their opinion, this is explained by the fact that madrasas are not learning environments where socially accredited professional knowledge is dispensed:

madrasas train neither physicians nor engineers nor development agents. The graduates of these institutions can only become teachers, businessmen or do administrative jobs that have no national significance. The highest social status they can achieve is to find themselves at the head of Islamic associations. Apart from teaching, they have no place in the public service. (p. 365)

In analyzing the Bilhan et al. comment, it is clear that in their view, madrasa graduates face tremendous challenges regarding career opportunities, as well as social integration and mobility, which may be due to the types of training they receive in these institutions.

### Table 1.

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Subjects taught</th>
<th>Public School</th>
<th>Catholic School</th>
<th>Madrasa</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>French</td>
<td>6 hrs/week</td>
<td>6 hrs/week</td>
<td>4 hrs/week</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>English</td>
<td>4 hrs/week</td>
<td>4 hrs/week</td>
<td>2 hrs/week</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>History/Geography</td>
<td>4 hrs/week</td>
<td>4 hrs/week</td>
<td>-</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Math</td>
<td>6 hrs/week</td>
<td>6 hrs/week</td>
<td>-</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Biology</td>
<td>2 hrs/week</td>
<td>2 hrs/week</td>
<td>-</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Civic Education</td>
<td>2 hrs/week</td>
<td>2 hrs/week</td>
<td>-</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Drawing</td>
<td>2 hrs/week</td>
<td>2 hrs/week</td>
<td>-</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>PC (Computer/Keyboarding)</td>
<td>4 hrs/week</td>
<td>4 hrs/week</td>
<td>-</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Bible Study</td>
<td>-</td>
<td>3 hrs/week</td>
<td>-</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Nahu/Arabic Grammar</td>
<td>-</td>
<td>-</td>
<td>2 hrs/week</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Tariq/History in Arabic</td>
<td>-</td>
<td>-</td>
<td>2 hrs/week</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Hadith/narratives of the Prophet</td>
<td>-</td>
<td>-</td>
<td>2 hrs/week</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Tauid/Quranic Explanation</td>
<td>-</td>
<td>-</td>
<td>4 hrs/week</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Imlad/Writing in Arabic</td>
<td>-</td>
<td>-</td>
<td>2 hrs/week</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Mutola/Reading in Arabic</td>
<td>-</td>
<td>-</td>
<td>2 hrs/week</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Ulum/Physics or Chemistry in Arabic</td>
<td>-</td>
<td>-</td>
<td>2 hrs/week</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Imlad/Math in Arabic</td>
<td>-</td>
<td>-</td>
<td>2 hrs/week</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Geography in Arabic</td>
<td>-</td>
<td>-</td>
<td>2 hrs/week</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

**Note:** Data obtained from the Direction de la Langue et Literature Arabe au Ministre de l’Education, de l’Alphabétisation et de la Promotion des Langues Nationales (2011)
It is important to mention that madrasas use the Arabic language as a medium of instruction in school. Therefore, courses like math, grammar, reading, writing, history, geography, physics and chemistry are offered in Arabic. A great emphasis is also placed on teaching the Islamic faith in these institutions. French and English are also taught, and Mali’s official language is French. Madrasas do not generally offer science and technology courses in high schools because of the lack of qualified teachers in these content areas (see Table 1).

Another reason which may explain madrasa graduates’ difficulty in finding jobs could be that at the university level only one Arabic department exists in Mali, offering courses in Arabic Language and Literature. Therefore, madrasa high school graduates who want to pursue undergraduate or graduate degrees in other areas such as mathematics, medicine, general science, social studies, and technology may need to transfer to departments where those courses are offered in French. With their limited knowledge of the French language, it is very unlikely that many graduates of madrasas will opt to change their majors.

Moreover, strong evidence exists that one way to recruit and maintain quality teachers is through professional development (Day 1993; Franke 2001; Supovitz and Turner 2000; Wilson and Berne 1999). Professional development for teachers is believed to affect teaching practice (Desimone et al. 2002). It also helps raise academic standards and contributes to school improvement (Corocan, 1995; Newmann, King and Youngs, 2000). But Mali’s government has done very little to prepare madrasa teachers to acquire credentials and skills needed by effective and professional educators. Despite their potential for impacting the education of children, until very recently madrasas have not been recognized as educational institutions by Mali’s government. As such, madrasas are denied all forms of the financial support made available to their public school counterparts. As Brenner (2007) described,

until the late 1980s, successive independent governments followed the French precedent of not recognizing the madrasas as legally constituted “teaching institutions;” officially they were classified as “Qur’anic schools.” As such, they did not qualify for government subsidy, a position justified by prevailing secularist policies. These same policies did not, however, prevent subsidies being granted to local Catholic schools, which were recognized as “teaching institutions.” (p. 204)

It is worth noting that Catholic schools receive 80 percent of the government grant-aid, and more than two-thirds of their personnel receive professional development training from government-sponsored programs (Hefner and Zaman 2007). The argument that many officials of the Ministry of Education often put forth is that Catholic schools have secured state funding and support because they have agreed to adhere to the conditions of control set forth by the government with respect to imparting a religious education alongside elements of the public school curriculum (see Table 2).

For example, the Malian education law requires that at the elementary and secondary school levels, all public and Catholic schools offer a range of subjects including languages (mainly French and English), math, biology, social sciences, and technology. Attainment targets as well as the number of hours to be spent on each subject are also specified (Judge 2011). The main reason for such a measure is to harmonize the contents of the curricula to allow students matriculating in faith-based institutions to sit for the same examinations as those in the public school system.
Table 2. – Dimensions and levels of the government’s participation in the funding of, and support for, public and private schools in Mali

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Description of items</th>
<th>Public schools</th>
<th>Catholic schools</th>
<th>Madrasas that have accepted government control and regulation over such aspects as curriculum, methods of teaching, and inspection</th>
<th>Madrasas that have not accepted government control and regulation</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Building and maintenance</td>
<td>Yes</td>
<td>No</td>
<td>No</td>
<td>No</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Providing classroom materials</td>
<td>Yes</td>
<td>Yes</td>
<td>Yes</td>
<td>No</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Teachers’ recruitment and retention in public service</td>
<td>Yes</td>
<td>Yes</td>
<td>Yes (1 percent each year nationwide)</td>
<td>Yes (1 percent each year nationwide)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Payment of teachers</td>
<td>Yes</td>
<td>Yes</td>
<td>No</td>
<td>No</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Teachers’ professional development training</td>
<td>Yes</td>
<td>Yes</td>
<td>No</td>
<td>No</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Teachers’ certification</td>
<td>Yes</td>
<td>Yes</td>
<td>No</td>
<td>No</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

Source: Data derived from Bray (2000) and Rose (2003)

Despite the fact that religious-affiliated, Catholic schools are able to choose their own teaching methods, after accepting state subsidies, they are expected to follow a mandated maximum and minimum number of hours per week with respect to each age group of students. State-funded, private schools are also allowed to provide religious and spiritual education (i.e. a typical example is Bible study) with the only restriction that the instruction should be limited to three hours per week.

As a consequence, though the majority of Islamic, faith-based schools in Mali experience extreme financial hardships, some leaders of those institutions have been very reluctant to accept the government’s funding. The school leaders are particularly concerned that by accepting the state’s financial support, they may lose their autonomy as private organizations. For these leaders, the fundamental mission of a madrasa is to teach Islamic beliefs and principles as dictated by the Holy Qur’an. Therefore, they perceive the government’s effort to reduce the number of hours devoted to Islamic teaching as a subtle attempt to do away with the essence of Islamic conscientiousness and identity. In comparing the curricula of madrasas with those of public schools and Catholic schools, real differences exist (see Table 1).

3. Critical Theory and Social Justice Frameworks

The researcher used the lens of critical theory to explore and interpret the study’s findings. Critical theory is concerned essentially with “issues of power and justice and the ways that the economy, matters of race, class, and gender, ideologies, discourses, education, religion, and other social institutions, and cultural dynamics interact to construct a social system” (Kincheloe and McLaren 2003, p. 437). Critical theory calls for empowering and giving voice to marginalized people, is committed to social justice by combating domination or subjugation, and allows a better understanding of individuals’ lived experiences (Ladson-Billings 1998; Solórzano and Yosso 2002). It is essential that critical theory be employed to enable the researcher and his future audience to understand the deprivations and struggles experienced by individuals who attend or are
associated otherwise with madrasas in Mali. Critical theory fits particularly well with the construct of social justice in the sense that it invites all the actors of education to put their learning into action for social justice.

3.1 Defining social justice

Social justice is a term that is frequently used when scholars from various disciplines talk about issues related to distributive rules (e.g. arithmetic equality\(^2\)), allocation of social rights, responsibilities and resources, such as money or prestige, and equitable education in a democratic society (Alemán 2007, 2006; Aristotle 1980 [trans.]; Brown 2004; Cammarota and Romero 2011; Collier and Thomas 2004; Dantley and Tillman 2006; Marshall 2004; Marshall and Oliva 2006; Moll et al. 1992; Nieto and Bode 2008; Plato 1974 [trans.]; Reisch 2002; Sabbagh, Dar and Resh, 1994; Thompson and Wood 2001). Reisch (2002) propounded that our understanding of social justice is inextricably connected to the way we construct or define such notions as “equality and freedom” as well as “policy questions” associated with our roles, responsibilities, and obligations as individuals and societies.

Nieto and Bode (2008), for example, conceptualized the idea of social justice as “a philosophy, an approach, and actions that embody treating all people with fairness, respect, dignity, and generosity” (p. 11). On a societal scale, the construct of social justice is viewed as providing each individual with the real (not simply in abstract and rhetorical codified terms) opportunity to achieve his or her potential by giving him or her access to goods, services, and the social and cultural capital of a society (Berlin 1996; Held 1984; Nieto and Bode 2008; Roemer 1996; White 2000).

In *The Republic*, Plato (1974 [transl.]) extended the meaning of social justice by linking it to human well-being. From Plato’s perspective, individual and social justice can be achieved only when harmony between reason, spirit and appetite exists, which he assumed were apparent and common attributes of all human beings. Social justice is also constructed from a cultural standpoint. It is perceived as affirming the culture and talents of each person and the group or groups with which he or she identifies (Banks 1996; Nieto and Bode 2008).

In an historical analysis of the evolution of the concept of social justice, Reisch (2002) contended that it was initially and solely applied to a specific people or nation whose ultimate goal was to redress the effects of inherited, hierarchical inequalities. In this regard, he argued that the idea of social justice has now shifted to become an ideological weapon or tool used by political activists from both sides of the spectrum (conservatives and liberals) to achieve their political aims.

According to Nieto and Bode (2008), social justice in education includes four essential components: First, a social justice perspective denotes challenging, confronting, and disrupting misconceptions, untruths, and stereotypes that lead to structural inequalities and discrimination based on race, social class, gender, and other social and human differences. Second, social justice in education means providing all students with the necessary material and emotional resources to offer them the opportunity to learn to their full potential. This includes books, curriculum, financial support, belief in students’

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\(^2\) Arithmetic equality favors an equal share in the allocated resources for all participants, regardless of personal traits, social inputs, or outputs. The rule, however, disregards the effects of the antecedents of the allocative situation and the consequences of the allocation on the achievement of eventual social equality (Sabbagh, Dar and Resh, 1994: 246).
abilities and worth, care for students as individuals and learners, and high expectations and rigorous demands of students. Third, social justice implies drawing on the talents and strengths students bring with them to their education. This requires doing away with ideas of deficit thinking that have often characterized marginalized students. Educational professionals should consider as assets the resources that students bring to the classroom, which can be a foundation for their learning. These resources include their languages, cultures, and experiences. Finally, social justice in the educational context refers to creating a learning environment that promotes critical thinking and supports agency for social change. Creating such an environment, as Nieto and Bode (2008) posit, would enable students to be better prepared in confronting the challenges of a democratic society.

One could argue that bringing the topic of social justice into the educational discourse or narrative is specifically relevant to madrasas in Mali. Research has shown that madrasas have long been deprived of adequate government funding simply because of the stereotypical misconception that they may be the hubs of Islamic fundamentalism (Brenner 2007; Soares 2005), even though educational professionals understand that without adequate funding, student success may be at risk. Furthermore, the conceptual prism of social justice fits well with the study of madrasas in Mali because it highlights long-standing inequalities between students who matriculate from Islamic, faith-based schools and their public school counterparts in terms of access to, and performance in, higher education.

4. Methodology, Study Participants and Data Analysis

This study used a qualitative approach to examine the challenges facing Islamic, faith-based schools within Mali’s education context. Qualitative designs fit into the framework of the naturalistic ontology because they center on naturally occurring, ordinary events in natural settings (Bowen 2005; Patton 2001). The fact that this research took place in the real-world setting of Mali’s madrasas and their surrounding communities provided the researcher with the opportunity to collect rich data on the phenomenon under study. The researcher took the time to reflect thoroughly on the participants’ responses to his open-ended questions (Marshall and Rossman 2006).

Qualitative research was compatible with this study because it was holistic and provided an in-depth understanding of the role that madrasas play regarding issues of social justice (Denzin and Lincoln 2003; Marshall and Rossman 2006). Finally, a qualitative approach provided an effective framework for eliciting the context and meaning of the participants’ views, as described in this study (Bogdan and Biklen 1998; Jester 2002).

4.1 Data collection

Constituents and patrons of madrasas were interviewed in the context of semi-structured, focus-group interviews (Merriam 1998). In qualitative research, interviews are believed to be the appropriate means of capturing the way people make sense of their feelings, worldviews, intentions, meanings, thoughts, and sub-contexts, on a topic, situation or group (Kvale 1996; Lichtman 2006; Rubin and Rubin 1995).

The researcher or moderators interjected only if a topic was not addressed at all or if the discussion came to a halt because a specific question had been misunderstood. No
preference of gender occurred (Kvale 1996; Rubin and Rubin 1995). The interviews focused essentially on government funding and support of schools (public versus private), access to higher education, job opportunities, and aspects of regulation and bureaucratic policies.

A pre-designed focus-group interview guide was developed by the researcher. Prior to interviewing participants, the researcher submitted the interview guide to a panel of experts composed of four professors, who were familiar with or specialized in issues related to focus-group interview questions. This panel of experts was asked to assess the content of the interview guide as a whole. The changes suggested by the reviewers were incorporated into the final interview guide. Probes were also used as needed (Krueger 1998). The focus groups were recorded using audiotape recorders.

4.2 Participants

Bloor, Frankland and Robson (2001) argued that the number of focus groups interviews to be held should be based on the research plan, including the nature of the sub-groups targeted. For this study, the number of focus groups interviewed was determined by theoretical saturation (Krueger and Casey 2009). To that end, eight focus groups participated during a period of three weeks (teachers = 20; graduates = 20; students = 20; parents = 20; madrasa leaders = 9; officials of the MoE = 3). For the purpose of this study, each focus group did not exceed 10 participants.

Regarding the appropriate size of a focus group, most scholars agree that 6 to 12 participants plus 1 facilitator who manages the discussion is an appropriate number (Gast and Peak 2010; Krueger 1988; Morgan 1997; Peek and Fothergill 2009).

During the recruitment process, the researcher relied heavily on two key sources (Kvale 1996) who had strong connections with the participants. These individuals were considered key sources because they were very close to the participants. One of the sources, for example, had been a faculty member in the Department of Arabic Language and Literature for nearly 10 years. Because of his position as a professor, he had strong relationships with the participants, most of whom he had taught or was still teaching during the time of the interviews.

The second source was a member of an Islamic organization. Through this position, he had developed strong connections with some participants. The sources were supportive of the research efforts and were willing to assist with participant recruitment. The study participants were selected based on purposive sampling, which is a procedure that involves selecting participants who are knowledgeable of the important issues (Patton 2001).

Access to the research sites was negotiated through appropriate “gatekeepers” (Lofland et al. 2006) at the MoE and selected madrasas. To avoid the problem of a dominant voice silencing others, an effort was made to keep the groups as homogenous as possible in terms of age, occupation, and sex.

4.3 Data analysis

The interview data were analyzed based on Miles and Huberman’s (1994) as well as Strauss and Corbin’s (1998) analytical procedures. The first procedure consisted of audio-taping, transcribing, and codifying the field notes into specific terms, concepts, and categories to identify “the set that fits” (Miles and Huberman 1994). In referring to categories, Merriam (1998) posited that they must have the following characteristics: a) reflect the purpose of the research, b) be exhaustive, c) be mutually exclusive, d)
sensitizing, and e) conceptually congruent. In the analysis process, Miles and Huberman (1994) contended that the process of moving from coding to conceptual categories represented a major challenge for qualitative researchers.

The second procedure was concerned basically with looking at the relationships between the different components of the overall data. Here, the focus was to highlight the overarching themes, trends, or patterns in the data and identify areas of strengths as well as gaps.

The third procedure was to cross-check the data by building a thematic matrix. Reading the stories helped the researcher to understand their feelings, perceptions, experiences and the meanings they attached to aspects of the phenomenon (Kvale 1996, Rubin and Rubin 1995; Spradley 1979). The researcher used Strauss and Corbin’s (1998) microscopic analysis technique. This procedure involved a line-by-line analysis intended to generate “initial categories with their properties and dimensions and to suggest the relationships among categories; a combination of axial coding and open coding” (p. 57). Open coding can be defined as the analytical process whereby concepts are identified and their properties and dimensions are found in the data. Axial coding is the process of relating categories to their subcategories (Strauss and Corbin 1998).

4.4 Trustworthiness

To ensure the quality or trustworthiness of the data, the researcher immersed himself in the cultural context of the madrasas’ constituents and patrons in Mali (Lincoln and Guba 1985). Such a sustained proximity with the target population allowed him to build up an atmosphere of trust with the study participants and increase his chance to get more credible data. Building trust is believed to be extremely important in that it prevents the researcher from committing errors, which can be detrimental to the sustainability and success of such a study (Marshall and Rossman 1999; Morrow and Smith 2000).

The researcher also used multiple sources of data (Berg 2000; Bogdan and Biklen, 2003; Creswell 2005; Marshall and Rossman 1999; Merriam 1998; Miles and Huberman 1994; Morrow and Smith 2000; Patton 2005; Shaw 2000; Stake 1995). To triangulate the data, interviews and observations were made, field notes were taken, and content analysis of the available archives related to madrasas was employed. Finally, audit trail and member-checking techniques were used (Morrow 2005). Thus, at every level of the study, the researcher asked his peers to examine his work by editing and challenging his field notes, tapes, memos, transcripts, documents, emerging analytic schemes, and theoretical framework or narratives shared with the study’s participants (Morrow and Smith 2000).

4.5 Ethical considerations

The study’s data were handled in accordance with the regulations set forth by Mali’s government for research with human subjects (Doumbo 2005). The study participants did not encounter any unusual or extraordinary risks by participating. Information about the study was given to the participants to ensure they were informed fully (Fine 1995; Guba and Lincoln 1994).

Participants’ informed consent for extensive use of the audiotape recordings was sought, received, and documented. For the participants who could not speak French, the consent form was translated into Arabic or Bamanankan (the most widely spoken local
language in Mali). Furthermore, participants were informed that their participation was voluntary and that they could exit the study any time without having to give an explanation.

To ensure confidentiality, all the data were kept in locked drawers in the researcher's office. To further protect participants, pseudonyms were used in place of their names. All reports and presentations derived from the study's findings ensured the participants' anonymity. The only incentive for participation was the offer of a communal meal to participants of focus groups, which is a customary cultural practice.

5. Thematic Analysis and Write-up of the Study's Findings

The nature of qualitative design is that iterative and salient themes emerge through data collection and analysis (Creswell 1988). Despite the inherent flexibility of the research, efforts were made to strategically separate the data into themes, patterns and promising categories. After transcribing the data, four interconnected themes emerged, including the benefits of madrasas and parental involvement; issues of equity; adequate funding; and employment opportunities for madrasa graduates after completing tertiary education.

5.1 Benefits of madrasas and parental involvement

When asked about their perceptions regarding the advantages of madrasas, parents proclaimed that three main reasons motivated them to send their children to these schools. First, they wanted their children to receive a good spiritual or religious education. In this regard, the parents expressed that madrasas were the appropriate environments to offer such an education. It was assumed that once children graduated from madrasas they would become honest citizens, aware of their religious duties and social responsibilities.

Second, though parents recognized the importance of Islamic education during the interviews, they also seemed to be pragmatic. The parents indicated that they were aware of the fact that religious knowledge alone was not going to be enough to help their children integrate into the Malian society. This is even truer during these times of harsh economic competition. Thus, they suggested that it was essential for their children to acquire knowledge and skills at school that would prepare them for careers. Parents indicated that they expected their children to be offered the same formal education opportunities in madrasas as students in public schools. This would require that madrasas offer the same subjects as public schools, which was not the case, at least from some parents' perspectives. Some courses simply were not taught in madrasas because of the lack of qualified teachers. Participants seemed to blame the government for lack of support with regard to meeting the training and professional development needs of teachers. One parent expressed this discontent:

We want the government to help us with good qualified teachers. Some of the teachers who operate in madrasas know nothing. It looks like they come to the teaching business when they have nowhere else to go. They lack motivation and commitment. Sometimes, the inspector may come to observe a class and leave without the teacher knowing that s/he is the inspector. Sometimes, the promoters [i.e. the entrepreneurs who founded madrasas as businesses], because they don’t have enough money to hire good teachers, ask their senior students to teach the junior ones. So, it is not surprising to see
a sixth grader teach a fourth grader. This is sad, if our children are to be taught by these kinds of teachers, isn’t it?

Third, parents mentioned that they decided to send their children to Islamic faith-based schools because of their low cost. Some madrasa leaders pointed out that despite the low cost of their organizations, they still had many students who could not pay their tuition and fees. The reason for this was that the majority of their students were orphans or their parents were very poor and could not afford to pay any school fees. But, parents said that since the madrasas’ mission is “to serve God”, they cannot kick out the students who are unable to pay their fees. Parents acknowledged their responsibility for helping their communities. Some teachers argued that it was faith that kept most of the teachers in the classroom, despite the fact that their job was not paying them well and they had little expectation of social mobility.

What is interesting is that despite the fact that some parents were apparently unsatisfied with the quality of teaching in madrasas, as indicated above, and though they had the option to pull their children out these schools and put them into public schools, they chose to let them stay in the same institutions. Four reasons may explain parents’ decision. First, some parents may live far from public school settings and find it extremely challenging to pay for the transportation of their children, especially if they have several. Therefore, they may decide to send their children to madrasas that are in their neighborhoods. Another explanation may be related to the medium of instruction used in madrasas. It is sometimes difficult for a parent to pull a child out of a madrasa where he or she has been taught for several years in Arabic and put him or her into a public school where the medium of instruction is French. The third reason may be related to lack of information. Some parents may not know that they can actually remove their children from madrasas, if they are not satisfied with the outcomes of those institutions, and put them into public schools. As a teacher put it, “some parents do not know their rights.” Finally, parents may decide to let their children continue studying in madrasas simply because they believe that these are teaching and learning environments where their beliefs, values, and identities are reflected better than in the public schools.

Teachers, promoters and students welcomed the involvement of parents in the education of their children. Both teachers and administrators recognized that the majority of parents regularly attended parent-teacher conferences and fundraisers and took part in the decision-making processes of the schools. When asked about their relationships with school professionals, parents overwhelmingly had a positive view. As one parent stated:

“We have a good communication channel with our children’s teachers and principal. The principal constantly informs us about events that are happening in the school. He also informs us about our children’s academic progress, which I really appreciate.

Students interviewed also contended that their parents were greatly involved in their education. They gave credit to their parents for much of their success at school. Some believed that they would never have been able to go to college without the relentless efforts and sacrifices of their parents in monitoring them closely in their academic work. A student commented:

“My parents are very involved in my education. They pay my tuition and fees. They come to school very often and ask my teachers about my progress at
school. In the night time, they never go to bed before ensuring that I have learned my lessons. My parents do not allow me to go out in the night time. They always tell me that I should take advantage of the night time to study and be ready for class the following day. Furthermore, if I miss a class for one or two hours, they ask me to justify my absence. Their involvement in my education has helped me a lot in my learning process at school. They always contact the promoter of our madrasa as well as my teachers and ask them how I am doing at school. I could have never been where I am now, at college, without my parents’ support of and care for my education.

The above statement, however, seemed to contradict how some madrasa teachers viewed parental involvement. Some of the teachers tended to perceive some parents’ lack of involvement from a deficit-thinking standpoint (Valencia 1997; Valencia and Black 2002). In their opinion, parents who did not attend parent-teacher conferences or participate in fundraisers or other school-related activities did not care about the education of their children or did not realize the importance of education. One teacher said, “parents who do not attend meetings at school just don’t know the value of education. That is the only way I can explain their attitude.”

However, this perception of parental involvement has been criticized for viewing parent-school relations through a narrow or conventional Western normative lens (Auerbach 2001; Boncana and Lopez 2010; Fowler 2000; Lareau 2000; Lightfoot 2004; Minke and Anderson 2005). From a traditional Western perspective, parents are said to be involved in the education of their children only when they participate in activities prescribed by the school. These activities may include attending parent-teacher meetings, participating in fundraisers for the school, chaperoning field trips, volunteering at school, and helping their children with their homework, as dictated by the school (Becker and Epstein 1982; Berger 1991; Davies 1991; Epstein 1986; Gordon 1977; Jeynes 2005; Hoover-Dempsey, Bassler and Brissie 1987; Welch and Sheridan 1995).

Scholars who have challenged the traditional conceptualization of parental involvement believe that everything that parents do to help their children grow and develop socially, morally, physically, psychologically, emotionally, spiritually, and intellectually to become useful and responsible members of the society can be considered as involvement. This may include feeding and clothing their children, ensuring that they are healthy, teaching them the values of life, and being involved in their school-related activities (Boncana and Lopez 2010; López 2001; Quezada, Diaz and Sanchez 2003; Torres-Guzman 1995).

Some parents also recognized that the leadership and teachers of madrasas were doing the best they possibly could to involve them in the education of their children. However, to a certain degree they seemed to blame themselves for not being involved as much as they should. Sometimes, as one parent explained, their lack of enthusiasm in attending parent-teacher conferences seemed to be attributed to the financial problems they confronted:

Parents are largely involved in all the decision-making processes at the school. As an example, in my child’s school, parents are part of a site-based management committee. However, I should admit that we are the ones who are often neglectful of the future of our children. As parents, we refuse to come to meetings at school because most of us are afraid that we may be asked to pay our children’s tuition and fees. And sometimes, you know, we do not have the money and may feel embarrassed if we are asked in front of our fellow parents. It is also difficult for some of us to always have to offer justification as to why we are late in paying or not able to pay our children’s tuition and fees. You know, this is sometimes the problem we are confronted with; otherwise, my humble
impression is that the school should not decide alone. We should have our say in whatever decision is being made on our behalf.

But, in listening to some parents’ stories, it appeared clearly that their collaboration with madrasas was not always smooth. They confessed that their relationships with the school professionals were sometimes tense or even volatile and tumultuous, especially when they were unable to pay for their children’s tuition and fees. Others complained that they were contacted by the office only when their children were in trouble. As a parent pointed out, “[t]hey never contact me. The only time I get their phone calls is when my child comes to school late, misses a class, or displays behavioral problems in class.”

5.2 The funding of schools

During the interview process, constituents and patrons of madrasas described the financial challenges they go through daily as Islamic, faith-based schools, and how those problems affect their organizations. They explained the interconnecting complexities of school finance and politics and provided typical examples of unequal treatment in terms of funding. Research suggests that governments’ allocation of resources to schools and school districts through budgets, including the funding and defunding of certain educational programs, are decisions that are always driven or influenced by politics (Alemán 2007; Amrein-Beardsley 2007; Gallagher 1993; Miles 2001; Picus 2004).

The Malian government seems to be rather selective in allocating its financial resources to schools. The public school system and higher education in Mali are supported entirely by the government. According to Pearce, Fourmy, and Kovach (2009), public expenditures on education represents 4.3 percent of the GDP—14.8 percent—of total government expenditure, with 50 percent being spent on pre-primary and primary education in Mali.

Part of the money the government spends on education comes from foreign aid. Foreign aid sources include multilateral organizations (most significantly the World Bank, the African Development Bank, and Arab Funds), and bilateral programs funded by the European Union, France, United States, Canada, Netherlands, Denmark, and Germany (Pearce et al. 2009).

Government investment in education generally covers an array of areas, including the construction of school infrastructures, the recruitment and retention of teachers, the payment of teachers’ wages, teachers’ professional development, and classroom materials or equipment, to name but a few.

A Catholic school receives nearly 80 percent of the government support provided a public school. This is explained by the fact that they have the same programs as public schools and their courses are offered in French. Therefore, because of the shortage of classrooms in public schools, each year the government sends some of the high school students from public schools to Catholic schools to receive their education.

In contrast with public and Catholic schools, madrasas, excluding the ones that have agreed to include elements of the public school curriculum, as dictated by government, alongside religious teaching do not receive any financial support from Mali’s government. Constituents of madrasas complain that they have been marginalized by the government and their only sources of funding are the contributions of parents and some Islamic non-governmental organizations (NGOs). As a teacher pointed out,

madrasas are funded through the monthly contribution of parents, trade and aid partners [e.g. charity or Zakkat coming from Middle Eastern countries.
Donations are often offered with the intention of building Islamic schools or classrooms. But there are some madrasas which are lucky enough to receive funding from Islamic NGOs.

The problem with this type of funding is that because the majority of parents who send their children to madrasas come from low socioeconomic backgrounds, they often have problems in paying their children’s tuition and fees on time, no matter how little the fees. As a consequence, the teachers may not receive their salaries on time. As a participant indicated, “it should be noted that the major problem we are currently facing is the late payment of contributions [tuition fees] and teachers’ salaries.” In addition, sometimes, because of the scarcity of resources, tension may occur between promoters of madrasas and their teachers, as a result of greed and poor management of the little resources they have. One teacher noted that

with respect to the financial aid that madrasas receive from various partners, it is worth noting the poor management of the promoters of madrasas. The challenge we face as teachers is that often times the promoters keep the money for themselves while their teachers are not being paid. There are promoters who travel outside the country to request funds in order to build madrasas and once they get the money they build their own homes.

These kinds of actions by promoters are not helpful in creating a climate of trust among the members of their organizations. In the long run, it could affect the academic outcomes of their students because the teachers may be frustrated, unmotivated and lose any sense of commitment to what they do and may eventually quit teaching. During one of the discussions, teachers were asked if money mattered at all in the fulfillment of their job. The participants proclaimed consistently that money (i.e. their salary and its appropriateness) played a vital role in their performance and, by extension, students’ academic achievement.

There is no comparison between teachers of madrasas and those of the public school system. When one does not receive a decent salary to live on, one cannot expect to get good results. It is as simple as this. Teachers in the public school system have better results than those of madrasas because they receive decent salaries. They do not have the same financial difficulties as we do.

In fact, one may argue that although money plays an important role in motivating teachers and influencing positive educational outcomes (Hanushek 1989; 1996b; Kozol 1991; Leuvenet al. 2007; Payne and Biddle, 1999), it is only part of an ensemble of conditions that need to be met to ensure quality teaching. Some of these conditions include the establishment of a good school climate, the hiring and retention of qualified teachers, high-quality professional development for teachers, parents and community engagement in the education of children, the availability of computer labs, and accessibility to well-furnished libraries (Boncana and Lopez, 2010; Norton 1999; Smith 1998; Webb and Norton 2003). Moreover, quality teaching may be related to the contents of courses taught, teachers

3 Cochran-Smith (2003) defined high-quality professional development as training “that improves subject matter knowledge, aligns with standards, and improves instructional strategies based on scientifically based research.” (p. 1)
setting high expectations for students, the sizes of classrooms, and the establishment of
induction and mentoring programs in schools (Amrein-Beardsley 2007; Murnane and Levy

According to an overwhelming majority of the participants, none of the aforementioned
conditions exist in madrasas, which is why they are calling for government’s assistance.
A teacher echoed the same concerns and pointed out that as long as the decision-making
processes in education continued to be influenced by politics, there would be no equity
amongst schools:

The field of education is becoming too political. That is why there is no
equity amongst schools. For example, madrasas do not operate normally
because they do not get any financial support from the government. The only
explanation I can give to the government’s decision of not helping madrasas
is because our decision makers hate the Islamic religion. They always want to
please their Western donors, who constantly put pressure on them not to
finance madrasas. They think that people who populate madrasas are
fundamentalists, which is not true. This is just politics. In addition, teachers
are not qualified. They are not also given any professional development
opportunity. That is why many teachers quit their jobs. Promoters of madrasa
do not hire qualified teachers because they can’t afford to pay them. All this
affects the contents of curricula and the way courses are taught. The contents
of curricula are not taught well because teachers are not of quality. That is
why I think the government is hypocritical. The government must also help
madrasa graduates integrate the teaching field. There is a clear discrimination
at public service exams.

Many scholars seem to share the opinion of the above respondent regarding the idea
that the whole activity of education is influenced by politics (Edwards, Fitz and
Whitty 1985; Iannaccone 1967; Morris and Sweeting 1991; Payne and Biddle 1999;
Valenzuela 1999). In other words, every school experience carries with it some political
qualities and consequences (Iannaccone 1983; Kirst and Mosher 1969; Shor 1993;
tests, in grading and tracking policies, in decisions about budget, curricula, and facilities”
(p. 37). Politics is in teacher-student relationships in the classroom and how courses
are taught as well as in how schools are controlled (Shor and Freire 1987). In fact, in
some countries school districts are controlled by school board members, who are
often elected local officials.

Furthermore, when the low salaries that most madrasa teachers earn are
considered, the situation may be exacerbated, as illustrated by this teacher’s comment:

The lack of significant wages forces some teachers of madrasas to do
maraboutage [to become fortune tellers] or to become beggars, therefore
completely bastardizing their mission as spiritual guides or role models for
their communities and the society as a whole. The teachers of madrasas have
nothing. In other words, their wages are very low. Some receive a monthly
payment of only 12,500 FCFA [$25/month]. Those who have 20 or 30 years
of experience receive only 30,000 FCFA per month [$60/month] while they
are married and have children to support. There is absolutely no future in
teaching in Islamic faith-based schools.
Many of the teachers and madrasa leaders interviewed proclaimed that they had chosen to teach in madrasas for a number of reasons, despite the fact that these institutions were not paying them well. First, some argued that they wanted to make a difference in the lives of children by providing them with the intellectual, moral and spiritual support they needed to grow and develop. As one teacher stressed:

We teach in madrasas because we love teaching. We love to share our knowledge and experiences with others. We want to help children and make a difference. Money is not always synonymous with happiness in life. Disseminating knowledge to children is the best enterprise one could ever be engaged in.

Another teacher interviewed was more realistic. For him, teaching, wherever it may be (i.e. public or private, Catholic or madrasa), was the same. The bottom line, he argued, was that one cannot get rich through a teaching career. This is especially true when one teaches in madrasas. Consequently, according to him, when one chooses to teach, it should be out of love and passion for the profession, and not for money:

One of my teachers said to me one day that when you decide to become a teacher, you need to be prepared to be poor. I suddenly became a madrasa teacher because in my village they needed someone who had some religious knowledge. I teach despite the risks associated with the profession because I love teaching. I think it is one of the noblest professions that can ever exist. When you teach, you help people in need of knowledge. You get a lot of “baraka from Allah” [i.e. rewards] from teaching. That is why I will be a teacher for the rest of my life.

Some teachers and administrators also exclaimed that faith helped them stay in the job. They expressed moral satisfaction because they were giving back to their communities. The impression from most of the respondents’ answers was that, as religious leaders, they felt that more than anything else, helping their communities was a sacrifice that was worth making, especially when those communities were financially challenged. A teacher commented:

[I] chose to become a teacher because I love the job. I teach in madrasas to prepare [for] the Hereafter. We have to accept the sacrifice to serve God. If everyone quits teaching in madrasas, those institutions will cease to exist, which is not a good thing for our communities because most of madrasas are populated with orphans. I think we have the moral responsibility to give back to our communities that have given to us everything we have in terms of property, knowledge, good manners, and good education.

Through some of their responses, one can clearly see the satisfaction and the sense of accomplishment that madrasa teachers feel in educating children and keeping them away from gangs and life on the street. The satisfaction they displayed in teaching in madrasas seemed to offset the financial problems they confronted. One participant mentioned this:

Though I do not earn a lot of money in teaching in madrasas, I am glad that I am contributing to the well-being of my community by fighting against
illiteracy. By accepting to educate children, we stabilize our communities. We teach our children values that may enable them to behave well in society. By teaching young people, we protect them from becoming delinquent, which, I believe, is a positive contribution to the society.

However, there is another group of teachers for whom madrasas are sources of income like any other profession. They admit that although the salary offered by madrasas is not as substantial as they would like it to be, it enables them, at least, to put food on the table and retain their dignity. They believe that it is better to earn little and be able to feed their families than to beg others for assistance and lose their sense of self-esteem and independence. Moreover, due to the nature of the training they have received, madrasas seem to be the only option for them. One teacher reflected:

Our parents used to send us to madrasas to study the Islamic religion. That time, we were not confronted with the problem of putting food on the table. But now, things have changed a lot. We must feed our families. Therefore, we are obligated to teach in madrasas in order to find something to survive. We have no choice. Otherwise, when you teach in madrasas you have no benefits whatsoever. In madrasas, there is no full-time contract, which means that you can be fired any time; no social security benefits, no tenure, and no pension for retirement. We teach in these institutions because we have nowhere else to go. With the type of training we have received, madrasas are the only places where we can operate. When you teach at high school, you are paid 1,000 FCFA [$2] per hour. But, you know, you’ve got to do whatever you have to do to survive, as long as it is in alignment with the guidelines and norms or is in the boundaries of the Islamic religion.

When parents were asked what they saw as their greatest concern regarding the education of their children, one study participant responded, “we wish to have financial assistance from the government because without money children will not be able to study. There is no computer lab in any of the madrasas as far as I know.”

In analyzing the above statement, it appeared that the need for financial resources to buy computers and software, teaching materials and many other types of equipment that might enhance or improve the working conditions of their schools remained a central feature of the general struggle of the constituents and promoters of madrasas. An agreement seemed to exist among all the respondents that madrasas, like public and Catholic schools, needed government funds to supplement their limited own-source income. They were strongly convinced that such assistance would allow the government to bring all schools (i.e. private or public) up to a common standard of resources (Karmel 1973; Watson 2003).

5.3 Equity and schooling

One area where the opinions of most participants (i.e. parents, teachers, students, and madrasa graduates) seemed to be overwhelmingly and consistently in agreement was the idea that madrasa students were not offered the same level of opportunity as their fellow students in public schools and Catholic schools. Most madrasa students attended poor schools, were taught by non-qualified teachers, and did not have access to higher
education, which was not the case for their counterparts matriculating in public or Catholic schools. Furthermore, madrasa students had to pay their own tuition and fees from elementary to high school, while their fellow students in public schools received free education up to college. A madrasa student pointed out that

madrasas have serious difficulties because they are Islamic faith-based private schools. Therefore, they are not supported by the government. Students in madrasas pay their own tuition and fees every month. I do not think that the conditions for social equity [exist] when it comes to madrasas. The reason is that we pay tuition and fees whereas students in public schools do not pay anything.

However, depending on whether a participant was a parent, a teacher, a student, a graduate of a madrasa or a government official, he or she sometimes had a different view with regard to the treatment that madrasa students receive. Though government officials interviewed recognized that madrasas were confronted with tremendous difficulties in the past, they indicated that conditions had improved dramatically as a result of a close collaboration between the Ministry of Education and the Arabic Department. As an example, in the past, no option existed for madrasa high school graduates to access college or university. But now this is no longer a problem, as explained by an official from the Arabic Department in the MoE:

Regarding the orientation of madrasa high school graduates, there is no problem now. There is a complete harmonization between the madrasa high school graduates and those of public schools. The holders of the basic education diploma (BED) are sent to high schools with scholarship offered by the government. However, the restriction is that when you are above 25 years old you are not eligible to get any scholarship. The students in madrasas are treated exactly the same as the students in the public school system.

This interviewee had a more positive view of the government’s involvement in madrasas. Judging from his perspective, you could deduce that madrasa students are not confronted with any problems that could affect their learning process. In other words, the respondent appears to believe that, nowadays, the debate over the lack of support of madrasas by the government should not exist because students matriculating in those institutions receive the same treatment as any other students in public or Catholic schools.

The respondent’s reaction can be interpreted in two ways. First, it may be attributed to the fact that he is a government official. Thus, he may feel that he has the moral and professional responsibility to defend the organization to which he belongs. Affiliation sometimes plays a role in the way people analyze and react to certain critical issues. Another interpretation is that he may be holding this position because he is afraid of losing his job by criticizing the government. Though the researcher assured him that everything he said would remain strictly confidential, he may nevertheless have decided to be cautious by maintaining a supportive stance of the government, to avoid any future trouble.

Regardless, the contradiction among the study participants from opposing sides of the spectrum (i.e. constituents of madrasas versus government officials) is important and enlightening in the sense that it gives us a broader picture and more in-depth understanding of the phenomenon under study.
Some promoters of madrasas seemed to share the same opinion as the government official. They recognize that madrasas that have adhered to the government’s policy of standardization of the curricula received subsidies from the government. A promoter of madrasa said this:

[T]he government provides us with biology, chemistry, history and geography books at the elementary school level. [In] the case of middle-school students of madrasas who are recognized by the government, once they have their BED, they are sent to high school at the expense of the government. Some are sent to French-speaking high schools, others are sent to madrasa high schools. The expenses for each of those students (80,000 FCFA/$200) were paid to madrasas.

However, some inconsistencies in the madrasa leaders’ claims seemed to exist. When asked what they thought the government should do to help madrasas achieve their goal, which is to improve students’ learning and their social mobility, some indicated that they wished the government could help madrasas by taking several actions: a) train teachers who operate in those institutions; b) provide teaching materials and facilities such as books, computer laboratories and libraries, to name but a few; c) consider madrasas as teaching and learning institutions when it comes to paying taxes (i.e. they wanted a special synthetic tax); d) provide madrasas with space or land, to build schools; e) recognize the qualifications of their graduates; and f) give scholarships to madrasa students who are eligible—the same way scholarships are allocated to other students.

It is worth noting that the special synthetic tax, if it is granted to madrasas, could benefit them in various ways. For example, by alleviating the tax burden on private schools, the government could allow them to save a tremendous amount of money. Not only can this money be used to cover the day-to-day operations of the schools, but it can also help the promoters of those schools to hire and retain qualified teachers, give teachers extra pay, and organize professional development for them. In addition, the management of madrasas can use the money they save from the synthetic tax to buy computers and software and teaching materials, build new classrooms and facilities for students, provide supplementary educational services in mathematics and reading for low-achieving students, organize field trips and special educational events at school, and conceive and develop many other programs that may boost the academic achievement of students. Finally, promoters of madrasas may be able to effectively and efficiently reallocate the money saved from the synthetic tax to areas where it is most needed, thus improving the working conditions of their schools. In short, asking madrasas to pay the synthetic tax could be one of the most effective strategies the government could use to make them financially accountable and less dependent on its support.

Regarding the problem of scholarships mentioned above, for nearly four decades, the successive governments in Mali have been following a long-standing tradition of offering scholarships to very gifted students (e.g. those who graduate from high school with a 4.0 GPA,) to study abroad. They are called bourses d’excellence, meaning “scholarships of excellence.” Students who are selected are often sent to Western or

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4 This is a form of income tax. It concerns business owners whose turnovers beyond the added-value tax are less or equal to 30,000,000 FCFA/$65,000). The synthetic tax ranges from 14,700 FCFA/$30 to 120,000 FCFA/$250.
Eastern European countries (France, Germany, Russia, and the Czech Republic), Latin America (Cuba), or Northern Africa (Algeria, Tunisia, Morocco, and Egypt) to pursue their post-secondary education. But, from its inception up to now, not a single madrasa student has been sent abroad to study through the bourses d’excellence. The only students who have been offered such an opportunity so far are those matriculating in public and Catholic schools.

When a student graduates from high school with a 3.0 GPA, whether he or she is enrolled in a public or Catholic school, he or she is automatically awarded a scholarship to pursue his or her tertiary education in Mali. Qualifying students receive a monthly stipend from the government to the amount of 30,000 FCFA/$60. They also receive free notebooks, pens, and pencils every three months. Most of the students in higher education rely on the money they receive from the government to pay for their rent, transportation, and food. In fact, without the stipends, it is unlikely that many students coming from the regions and who do not have relatives in Bamako, the capital city, would continue their studies (all the colleges in Mali are centralized in Bamako). But madrasa students do not get any financial support from the government, even if their GPAs are 3.0 or higher. The reason is that their diplomas are not recognized by the government. As such, they are considered to be candidats libres (i.e. independent candidates) in the system of higher education and have to rely on their parents to pay for their studies. Consequently, those who come from low socioeconomic backgrounds and who do not have relatives in Bamako abandon their educations after high school.

Another inequity, according to some participants, was related to access to higher education. They claimed that once madrasa students graduated from high school and decided to go to college, they encountered so much bureaucratic red tape that many students gave up on any attempt to further their studies. Those students whose parents had the financial means were simply sent to Arabic-speaking countries to pursue their education. One parent stated:

There is no equity between students enrolled in the public school system and those matriculated in madrasas. The madrasa high school graduates have to sit for an exam in order to have access to higher education, which is not the case for our counterparts in the public school system. Moreover, at the level of government, there are no Arabic speakers [in] positions of responsibility who can be our spokespersons. For example, there are no Arabic speakers who are inspectors. Because the official language in Mali is French, all the inspectors are French speakers.

The concept of red tape or bureaucratic procedures mentioned above is an old theory of managerial leadership (Baldwin 1990; Bozeman 1993; Buchanan 1975; DeHart-Davis and Pandey 2003; Feeney 2012; Pandey and Moynihan 2006; Pandey and Scott 2002; Pandey& Wright 2006; Scott and Pandey 2005; Weiss 1989). It is defined as “guidelines, procedures, forms, and government interventions that are perceived as excessive, unwieldy, or pointless in relationship to decision making or implementation of decisions” (Rosenfield 1984: 603). Research suggests that the heavy reliance or emphasis on rules and regulations in bureaucratic organizations is ponderous and ineffective in the sense that it leads to procedural delays associated with many layers of oversight (Bozeman, Reed and Scott 1992; Pandey and Bretschneider 1997). Red tape can often be a source of irritation or frustration and cause demoralization and
demotivation of employees (Bozeman 2000; Torenvlied and Akkerman 2012). Subsequently, it may lead to the dysfunction of an organization (Hage and Aiken 1967; Rainey, Pandey and Bozeman 1995; Scott and Pandey 2000).

The term “red tape” is used in this context to delineate the number of hurdles madrasa students have to go through in terms of paperwork and testing before being accepted into the system of higher education in Mali. The laws, rules, regulations and procedures that they have to comply with are so excessive and require so much time and money that some students give up on the pursuit of higher education. This is especially true with students coming from low socioeconomic backgrounds. Therefore, it is not surprising to see many of them become businessmen or “lay preachers” in their communities instead of furthering their studies at college or university.

A typical example of red tape is the fact that madrasa students are required by law to sit for exams to have access to higher education. Sometimes, the application process may take weeks or even months. At every level of the process, they have to provide voluminous amounts of documents and be subject to very meticulous cross-verifications, a situation that has led many of the study participants to perceive they are being unfairly treated simply because they matriculated from Islamic faith-based schools. A student stated:

[I] have nothing against students from other tracks, but I do not think that it is fair to make us sit for college entrance examinations while students in public and Catholic schools do not go through the same process. The same rules and regulations should be applied to everyone. Don’t you think so? This is the sixth time I have been trying to go to college, and I still haven’t been able to pass the examinations. The door is completely closed. Before, they used to tell us that this was due to the fact that we could not speak French. But now that is not the case. I really think that the main goal of the government is to force us to learn the Western culture, values, and identity, and get rid of madrasas because they don’t like Islam. In order to have access to the university you need to speak French. This is frustrating and revolting, isn’t it? In addition, the exams are not well organized. Many madrasa students have stopped sitting for these exams because of the way they are organized, which completely lacks transparent guidelines.

Another student lamented the same problem of access to higher education and went further to highlight the difficulties students faced in attempting to pursue certain majors. It seemed that the government was trying to control even the subjects that were being taught in the Department of Arabic Language and Literature:

Madrasa students are never treated the same way as students in public schools. For madrasa students, access to higher education is not easy at all. As an example, in our 12th grade class, we were 113 students. After graduating from high school, among all those students, I am the only one who has been able to pursue a post-secondary education in Mali. Others were obliged to go to Arabic-speaking countries to continue their education. Furthermore, we want to study medicine, biology, math and others scientific fields, but, unfortunately, our department does not offer these subjects. You know, it is also difficult to change majors at this stage because we do not speak French. The government has also forbidden that English be taught as a second language in our department. It was only after we went on strike several times that the
government finally abandoned the project. Now thanks to God, we are taught in both English and French in addition to the Arabic language.

The above comments are clear evidence that madrasa students suffer from injustice, whether it is intended or not. It shows that the “equality of opportunity” of students, as it relates to access to higher education, may be not only in jeopardy but essentially non-existent (Zolberg 1976).

5.4 Lack of employment opportunities

Another problem encountered by madrasa students begins when they graduate from college. This is due, in part, to the lack of competitiveness of madrasa students compared to students in the mainstream. It is important to mention that at the higher education level, the Department of Arabic offers only courses in Arabic Language and Literature. As a matter of fact, very few madrasa graduates study law, medicine, science or technology because very few Arabic-speaking professors staff these areas. This is why the only public service competitions in which they may qualify to participate are teaching or clerical/administrative positions. However, the number of madrasa candidates who are recruited into public service is extremely low, i.e. less than 1 percent (Bilhan et al., 2006). As a participant described:

We are really worried because even if we graduate from higher education there are no prospects of job opportunities. For example, since 1998 the government has not hired a single elementary [or] middle school madrasa teacher [in] the public service. In addition, the number of people recruited to the public service is very minimal compared to the number of graduates from public schools. In other words, students graduating from the educational mainstream have more opportunities to be recruited than those graduating from madrasas.

6. Implications for Policy and Practice

In light of the literature demonstrating the lack of emphasis on social justice issues in education – such as funding and support for schools, equity, and employment opportunities (Aleman 2007; Aleman and Rorrer 2006; Marchall 2004; Nieto and Bode 2008; Theoharis 2007) – coupled with this study’s findings confirming such a deficit in Mali, implications exist for changes in educational policy and practice. The study’s findings suggest two main changes for policy and practice. These include a) offering equal opportunities\(^1\) to madrasa students and b) securing teacher preparation and professional development opportunities for madrasa faculty members.

\(^1\) The term “equal opportunity” has been defined by Sabbagh et al. (1994) as follows: “[E]quality of opportunities states that every individual, regardless of social status, should have equal access to the fountainheads of resources and should be afforded equal conditions to compete for their attainment” (p. 246).
6.1 Offering equal opportunities to madrasa students

Research suggests that access to equal educational opportunities for all students, regardless of whether they matriculate in private or public schools, is critical to the school improvement efforts of any nation (Balfanz and Iver, 2000; Datnow and Stringfield 2000; Mckersie 1993; Russell and Flynn 2000). In the Malian context, equal opportunity is essentially concerned with the idea of fairness in terms of the allocation of resources, as well as access to higher education and job opportunities for madrasas students after tertiary education.

The study’s findings showed that participants were concerned particularly that madrasas, because of their status as Islamic, faith-based schools, did not enjoy the same treatment as public schools with regard to receiving government support, as described above. That is why some of the respondents said that madrasas did not offer high-quality education. However, one could argue that the low quality of education observed in madrasas could be attributable to many interconnected factors, including the lack of funding, the lack of teacher-training programs for students matriculating from these institutions who might be interested in teaching careers, the governance of madrasas (the way they are run), and the impact of the language of instruction.

6.2 Securing teacher preparation and professional development opportunities for madrasa teachers

Today, with the policies demanding increased accountability worldwide, including in the Republic of Mali, teachers are under constant pressure to show student gains in learning achievement. To prepare children to become proficient readers, for example, it is recommended that higher education institutions focus on preparing and training teachers on not only how to teach the content areas to meet the needs of more heterogeneous student populations with different needs, cultures, values and identities, but also how to be critical thinkers (Bryk, Rollow and Pinnel, 1996; Boykin 2000; Corbin and Ledford 2002; Little 1993; Moore et al. 2000; Murtadha-Watts 1998; Thompson, Bakken and Clark 2001). Salzman et al. (2005) argued that the professional development of teachers is essential in improving the academic achievement and motivation of students at the elementary level. Bordenkircher (2005) made similar comments when he stated:

[T]eacher preparation is key to the long-term success of literacy initiatives. The goal is to prepare new teachers to enter the profession in which lifelong learning and the development of expertise is expected. Preparation programs must be based on a clear understanding of the foundations for research-based literacy teaching and must incorporate effective ways of helping new teachers acquire the understandings and skills they need. (p. 8)

However, despite the dire professional development needs of teachers in madrasas at all levels and in all content areas, participants claimed that the government had done very little in opening teacher preparation programs across the nation intended to help the faculty of these institutions. As an example, only one privately funded, Islamic, teacher-training institute exists in Mali. Because the teacher training school in Timbuktu is private and offers its courses in the Arabic language, it does not receive any financial or logistical support from the government. Madrasa students who are interested in attending the school have to travel to Timbuktu at their own expense and pay their tuitions and fees from personal funds.
Given the financial hardships that many madrasa students are confronted with nowadays, very few of them can afford to attend the institute in Timbuktu. As a consequence, the lack of teacher preparation programs has been said to have negatively affected madrasa students in Mali with regard to their academic achievement and competitiveness for the job market. When madrasa college graduates’ scores on public service examinations are compared to the performance of public school graduates, the former’s chances of being hired by Mali’s government are rather limited (Bilhan et al. 2006).

7. Conclusions and Discussion

Social justice-based discussions may be an effective approach for Mali’s education policymakers to employ to refocus their attention on the real problems confronting the country’s education system. If the government is to attain its major goal of educating 95% of young people and adults by the year 2015, as it claims, it must involve all actors in the education system (i.e. both public and private) without any discrimination, including that which may be implicit. Therefore, excluding any group only contributes to the reinforcement of existing gaps in equality, as well as tension and mistrust between the constituents of those groups and decision-makers at the Ministry of Education. If the students, educators, and parents of madrasas are to enjoy the same level of emancipation and participation in society, these discussions must begin now.

Because madrasas students are Malians, they deserve, like any other Malian citizen, to have fair and equal access to education as well as the country’s other civil services. More research needs to be conducted to maximize the effectiveness of the social justice-based discussion approach.

In addition to discussions, it is important that all the actors of madrasas (i.e. leaders, teachers, parents, students, and alumni) form some kind of an association or consortium for the purpose of advocating for madrasas by lobbying to the government. Such a strategy may put them in a stronger position to influence the government’s decisions regarding some of the policies that directly affect them. Furthermore, madrasas can seek funding in an organized way from Islamic philanthropists, since the government and Western NGOs operating in the field of education have denied them such a support.

Finally, to advance social justice, one must also have the courage to denounce and challenge injustices anytime and anywhere (Freire 1990; Spleight and Ver, 2004). Prilleltensky and Nelson (1997) suggested that “to live the value of social justice, we must take some risks by becoming more outspoken advocates” (p. 183).

This study provides a preliminary critical analysis of the injustices that madrasas, as privately funded, Islamic faith-based educational institutions, face in Mali. It may serve as a stepping stone in empowering or giving a voice to a portion of the Malian education community and society that has long been silenced and marginalized, not on the basis of rigorous, transparent criteria, but rather on uninformed assumptions and interpretations.
References


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