Cultural Diversity and Education in Cameroon: Challenges and Opportunities

Diversidad Cultural y Educación en Camerún: Desafíos y Oportunidades

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"Africa changes you forever, like no other place on earth. Once you've been there, you'll never be the same" (Brian Jackman).

Abstract: This work is the result of cooperation, research and inter-university transfer, carried out thanks to a grant awarded in 2023 by the Office of Development and Cooperation (ODEC) of the University of Lleida to the annual call for development cooperation projects. This collaboration is not recent, as the faculties of Education of the universities of Yaoundé I (Cameroon) and Lleida (Spain) have been working together for more than ten years with the ultimate goal of improving the training of their students, future teachers and social educators. Specifically, empirical qualitative work has been carried out with thirty-two young Cameroonians who are studying for their bachelor's or doctoral degrees in both Spain and Cameroon. As the project is much broader, this article reflects on how the Cameroonian school of the 21st century should be a real space for multicultural encounters, and focuses on such aspects as coexistence, respect for differences, inclusion, the gender perspective, the management of the diversity of ethnic groups, etc. At the same time, it does not ignore that it is necessary to promote cooperation and mutual knowledge of both educational contexts.

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Resumen: Este trabajo es el resultado de una experiencia de cooperación, investigación y transferencia interuniversitaria, que se ha llevado a cabo gracias a una ayuda concedida, en 2023, por la Oficina de Desarrollo y Cooperación (ODEC) de la Universidad de Lleida a la convocatoria anual de proyectos de cooperación al desarrollo. Esta colaboración no es reciente, ya que desde hace más de diez años las facultades de Educación de las universidades de Yaoundé I (Camerún) y de Lleida (España) aúnan esfuerzos con el objetivo final de mejorar la formación de sus estudiantes, futuros *docentes y educadores sociales. Concretamente se ha realizado un trabajo empírico de carácter cualitativo con treinta y dos jóvenes cameruneses que cursan sus estudios de licenciatura o doctorado tanto en España como en Camerún. Siendo el proyecto mucho más amplio, en este artículo se reflexiona acerca de cómo la escuela camerunesa del siglo XXI debe ser un espacio real* de encuentro multicultural; e incide en aspectos como la convivencia, el respeto a las diferencias, la inclusión, la perspectiva de género, la gestión de la diversidad de los grupos étnicos, etc. Al tiempo, que no olvida, que es preciso potenciar la cooperación y el conocimiento mutuo de ambos contextos educativos.

Palabras clave: Interculturalidad, Escuela camerunesa, Gestión intercultural, Diversidad lingüística, Perspectiva de género.

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1. INTRODUCTION

The Office of Cooperation and Solidarity of the University of Lleida (UdL) depends on the Vice-Rectorate for Social Commitment, Equality and Cooperation and was created thirty years ago (1994) with the aim of raising awareness, training and promoting the solidarity of the university community and citizens towards the situation of inequality in South-North relations. As specified in its statutes, the University of Lleida understands that development cooperation is an essential part of the University's social commitment and therefore endorses this commitment when it states that:

> **The UdL promotes cooperation in the fields of teaching, research, technology and culture with the least developed peoples and groups in order to reduce the difference between peoples and promote education where it is most needed, fostering values of solidarity based on mutual enrichment (article 6.3).**

The University of Lleida understands that its work in the field of cooperation "is closely linked to its natural sphere of action: teaching and research, issues that are essential both for the comprehensive training of students and for a better understanding of the problems that threaten the achievement of human and sustainable development on a universal level" (art. 11).

For this reason, every year the Development and Cooperation Office opens calls for applications for financial aid and mobility -for students and teaching staff- aimed at promoting cooperation projects between the UdL university community and developing countries, in accordance with the list of the Human Development Index (HDI) of the United Nations Development Programme (UNDP) and, within these, especially targeting the most disadvantaged social sectors.

In the 2023 call, the research group led by Dr. Núria Llevot obtained financial support to carry out a cooperative project between the Cameroonian University of Yaoundé I and the University of Lleida, which gave great satisfaction since, for more than a decade, they had been collaborating on other projects, research, publication of articles, direction of doctoral theses of Cameroonian students, etc.

In the case of this cooperation project, the main aim is to improve the university system in Cameroon, focusing on the University of Yaoundé I and, more specifically, on the training of future secondary school teachers in the speciality of foreign languages. In addition, it is expected that the results will also have an impact on the primary education and social education degrees at the University of Lleida, improving the intercultural competences with a gender perspective of the student body. Likewise, the implementation of joint

activities is envisaged. These will combine teaching, research and the transfer of knowledge between the teaching staff and the students of both universities, counting on the collaboration and active involvement in the project of students from Cameroon but who are studying their third-cycle studies at the University of Lleida.

This project has two main objectives: to strengthen the Cameroonian university system (especially that of the University of Yaoundé I) and to promote the intercultural competence of the students of the universities of Lleida and Yaoundé I. From these two main objectives, the following specific objectives are derived:

- To develop training for teaching staff and students from both universities.
- To promote cooperation between the teaching teams at the two universities.
- To promote research and transfer through the design and implementation of research projects and the publication of the results and the holding of seminars in areas of common interest.
- To encourage the participation of women in university studies and to empower Cameroonian youth.
- To favour mutual knowledge and intercultural dialogue and to dismantle stereotypes of some people about others.

To meet these objectives, as mentioned above, teaching, research and transfer actions are combined. At the time of writing this article, the research team has carried out a large part of the work: bibliographical and documentary work; qualitative research; stays and sessions in the faculties of Education of both universities; three international seminars to present the results of the research; presentations at international conferences; active participation of students from the UdL and the École Normale Supérieure of the University of Yaoundé I; recording of audio-visual capsules; and publication of scientific articles.

Finally, for this work, we only present the results obtained from the sociocultural context of the Cameroonian family, the education at the different stages of schooling, the family-school relations; and, the treatment and management of linguistic and cultural diversity under gender perspectives, in classrooms.

2. CONTEXTUALISING CAMEROON

Cameroon is a Central African country known as la "Africa in miniature" for its ethnic, cultural, geographic, climatic and linguistic variety (Mongo, 2023). In area it is similar to that of Spain and has a population of around twenty-nine million (Worldmeters, 2024).

The Republic of Cameroon lies between Western and Central Africa. It borders Equatorial Guinea, Gabon and the Congo to the south; to the east with the Central African Republic; to the northwest with Chad; and finally, to the west with Nigeria.

Historically, the north belonged to the great empires of the Sahel; the west of Cameroon was the land of the Bamiléké communities who are descended from the Baladis of Ancient Egypt. The south was linked to the societies of the equatorial jungle, while the populations on the coastal areas were always in contact with travellers who came by sea. The result nowadays is a mosaic of around 250 ethnic groups (Kamkou et al., 2018) divided into five major groups: the Bantu (Fang, Bassa, Douala, Eton, Bakweri, Ewondo); the Semi-Bantu (Tikar, Bamiléké, Bamoun); the Sudanese (Mousgoum, Toupouri, Boum, Matakam and Kapsiki); the Hamites (Bororo and Foulbes) and, finally, the Semites (Arabs and Choa).

In the past, Cameroon has been approached by several countries for colonial and commercial reasons (mainly the exploitation of its resources and the slave trade). Specifically, Portugal was the first European country to set foot on Cameroonian soil in 1472, and its explorers named the current Wouri River the Rio dos Camaroes (River of Shrimps) because of the abundance of these

crustaceans that were caught there, and it was this that eventually gave rise to the country's name.

Cameroon was colonised by the German Empire when it was at its peak in the late 19th century as Kamerun. After the defeat of World War I, it was divided between France, which held on to most of it, and Britain. For many years, France used assimilation and centralisation, imposing its language and culture, banning African languages in the official sphere and a total control of government. The British zone, on the other hand, was governed by Indirect Rule, so it had greater freedoms and less intervention in politics. In addition, there was greater respect for local cultures (Quinzaños, 2019).

In 1960, the French-ruled region of Cameroon gained independence as the Republic of Cameroon. A year later, British Cameroon was integrated into the Republic of Cameroon to form the Federal Republic of Cameroon. In 1972, the country was renamed the United Republic of Cameroon and finally the Republic of Cameroon in 1984. The country is divided into ten regions with their respective capitals: Yaoundé, Ngaunderé, Garua, Marua, Douala, Bafoussam, Bamenda, Buea, Ebolowa and Bertua.

As a result of the colonial past, two foreign languages, French and English, have official status and are the languages of the administration. 'French is used much more than English in state affairs and very often official texts and decisions are first drafted in French and then translated into English' (Mba, 2013, p.2). On the other hand, around 230 local languages are spoken in Cameroon. These belong to three of the four African language families: Niger-Congolese, Afro-Asiatic and Nilo-Saharan. These indigenous languages have for many years been relegated to the domestic and informal spheres.

With regard to religious practice, it should be noted that the constitution defines Cameroon as a secular state that guarantees freedom of worship, with the country's different religions coexisting without significant friction between the different communities. Christianity (40% of the population) is the

most widely practised religion, followed by the animist tradition with another 40% and Muslims with 20%, the latter concentrated in the northern regions.

To close this section, we present some figures. In 2021, Cameroon registered an index of 0.57 points, which indicates a low level of human development (HDI) in comparison with other countries in the world, occupying the 151st position. It has a population pyramid typical of young countries, which is common in African countries with high birth rates. The United Nations Population Fund (UNFPA, 2024) indicates that more than half of Cameroon's population (70%) is aged under 30, and the population aged 0-14 years represents 41.6% of the total, while the population aged 65 years and over is only 3%. The school-age population (4-23 years) represents 53% of the population.

Despite improvement in recent years, the country still faces significant challenges in terms of the health, education and living standards of its population. For example, life expectancy is 59 years, well below the world average of 72 (Kamkou et al., 2024). Furthermore, more than 38.4 per cent of the people live below the poverty line and 7.3 per cent of the population suffers from malnutrition.

Moreover, only 53% of the school-age population attends school. According to Cameroon's report at the Education Transformation Summit in New York (2022):

> "The school population is estimated at 13.2 million representing almost 53% of the total population in 2020. 7.7 million pupils, apprentices and students, 47% of them girls, were identified in schools and vocational training centres throughout the country in 2021. Teaching is provided by 234,726 teachers/trainers, 55% of whom are women." (République du Cameroun, 2022, p. 2)

The Cameroonian education system shows a significant gap between the number of pupils enrolled and the school-age population, as well as gender differences and problems of inclusion of diversity, these being the issues addressed in this article.

3. THE CAMEROONIAN EDUCATION SYSTEM

3.1. Organisation and structure

The legal and regulatory framework of the Cameroonian education system is governed by a set of laws and texts, among which the following stand out: Education Guidance Law No. 98/004 of 14th April 1998, which establishes the general legal framework for education and applies to pre-primary, primary, general secondary and technical education, as well as teacher training; Law N°2018/010 of 11th July 2018, which regulates the general legal framework and foundations of vocational training; and, Law N°2023/007 of 25th July 2023 on the orientation of further education in Higher Education, which determines the fundamental orientations and establishes the general rules for the organisation, functioning, management, financing and control of higher and post-secondary education, both public and private.

The education system maintains the colonial legacy of domination by France and England and, as a result, is divided into a French- and English-speaking sub-systems. Each of these subsystems is composed of five levels of education/learning: pre-school, primary, secondary and higher education and teacher training colleges.

Pre-school education runs from four to six years of age, although some public schools admit children as young as three at the request of parents. Most pre-schools are divided into four sections: pre-school, infant section, middle section and upper section. According to the report on Cameroon at the World Summit on Education Transformation (2022), during the 21/22 school year, the gross enrolment ratio (GER) in pre-school was 39.7%, about one point higher than the previous year. This rate is particularly low in the Far North region (7.9%), where potential demand is one of the highest in the country.

Primary education runs from the age of six to eleven, graduating in the French-speaking subsystem with the Certificat d'Études Primaires (CEP) and in the English-speaking subsystem with the First School Leaving Certificate (FSLC). At the end of this stage, pupils can choose to continue their studies in a college or secondary school, or to do short basic vocational training. According to PASEC (2021), in the 2019-2020 academic year, primary education was attended by 4,578,708 pupils, of whom 2,157,098 were girls (around 47%). This represents an increase of 3.9 per cent compared to the 2018/2019 academic year. Of these pupils, 76% were enrolled in public schools, while 23% were enrolled in private schools.

Among the students in private schools, 65% were enrolled in secular schools and 35% in denominational schools (66% in Catholic schools, 21.7% in Protestant schools and 12.3% in Islamic schools).

Secondary education lasts seven years and consists of two cycles in each sub-system (French and English-speaking), with two modalities: general secondary education and technical secondary education. Admission to the first cycle in general secondary education is by an entrance examination, called *concours d'entrée en 6eme* or common entrance, at the age of twelve. While, the Brevet d'Études du Premier Cycle (BEPC) is obtained after four years of study in the French-speaking subsystem, in the English-speaking subsystem, the General Certificate of Education Ordinary/Level (GCEO/L) is obtained after five years. For the second cycle, the entry age is 16. In these sub-systems, the respective duration of studies for the General Certificate of Education (GCE) and the Baccalauréat is three and two years.

Technical secondary education has two cycles. The first cycle lasts four years and leads to the Certificat d'Aptitude Professionnelle (CAP), which qualifies pupils for immediate professional insertion. It consists of two sections in each sub-system: a craft section, in which pupils are trained in technical subjects (masonry, carpentry, electricity, etc.), and a domestic section (cookery, childcare, etc.). The legal age for entry to these studies is 14 and the course lasts two years. The second cycle is open to holders of the CAP and BEPC. The studies last three years, leading to the Technical

Baccalaureate or a General Certificate of Advanced Level Education giving access to university education or access to the labour market.

In terms of the higher education system, the Institut d'Etudes Universitaires was founded in October 1961. This became the Federal University of Cameroon the following year and was renamed the University of Yaoundé in 1973. The 1993 university reform (decree no. 93/036 of 29th January 1993) saw the creation of six public universities: Yaoundé I, Yaoundé II, Douala, Ngaounderé, Dschang and Buéa. In 2008, the University of Maroua was created followed in 2010 by the University of Bamenda. Today (2024), there is a total of 11 public universities, with the addition of the newly-created universities of Bertua, Ebolowa and Garua. Each region has a public university except Yaoundé, which has two: the universities of Yaoundé I and Yaoundé II.

Private Institutes of Higher Education (IPES) include the Institut Universitaire Siantou, the Higher Institute of Translation, Interpretation and Communication (ISTIC), the Protestant University of Central Africa (UPAC) and the Higher Institute of Applied Technology and Management (ISTAG).

Teacher training colleges are vocational training centres, the vast majority of which are attached to public universities. Of particular note are the primary teacher training schools called Écoles Normales d'Instituteurs de l'Enseignement Général (ENIEG), which train teachers for nursery and primary schools, and the Écoles Normales d'Instituteurs de l'Enseignement Technique (ENIET), which train post-primary and lower secondary technical teachers. The duration of the studies in these schools varies from one to three years, depending on the entrance qualification.

There are also teacher training colleges for secondary teachers, of which there are two types: the Higher Teacher Training Colleges (ENS) and the Higher Teacher Training Colleges for Technical Education (ENSET).

3.2. Orientations and challenges of Cameroonian education policy

According to the report by Ministère de l'Éducation de Base (2022), the demand for education continues to be marked by sustained growth in enrolment at all levels of education, with a majority of pupils enrolled in public schools. In the 2021-2022 academic year, the Cameroonian education system had 8,050,332 pupils enrolled. Breaking this figure down by educational stage, 596,197 pupils (7.40%) were enrolled in pre-school and 4,944,290 (61.41%) in primary education; 1,983,379 pupils (24.63%) in secondary education; 413,888 pupils (5.14%) in university; 11,903 pupils (0.14%) in teacher training colleges; 59,557 pupils (0.74%) in vocational training; and 41,118 pupils (0.51%) in non-formal education.

Cameroonian legislation recognises education as a fundamental mission of the state, making it a priority. Educational institutions must guarantee equal opportunities for all citizens and are free and compulsory at the public primary level. At the same time, Law 2004/022 of July 2004 established the norms of organisation and operation to give impetus to private education in the country. Following its commitment to the Sustainable Development Goals, particularly Goal 4 (SDG4), Cameroon has gradually increased its efforts to ensure inclusive, equitable and quality education and promote lifelong learning opportunities for all, with the emphasis on reducing significant inequalities in the education and training sector.

However, we cannot ignore the fact that in recent years the country has faced major challenges, such as the global socio-economic crises, natural disasters, the security crisis and, more recently, the COVID-19 epidemic, which affected the schooling of more than 1.5 million children and young people, especially in the most disadvantaged areas of the north of the country. These crises, aggravated by violence, have led to population displacements, and highlighted the limited capacity of the Cameroonian school system and local communities to meet the needs of the population.

Thus, in the regions in the Lake Chad basin crisis, more than 515,000 school-age children are in need of effective educational structures. In the North-West and South-West regions, a large part of the formal education system has been paralysed, hindering access to education for more than 462,000 children.

With regard to the COVID-19 health crisis, the application of the restrictive regrouping and displacement measures put in place by the government on 18th March 2020 affected the schooling of 7.2 million students (4.5 million in basic education, 1.8 million in secondary education, 40,000 in vocational training and 347,000 in higher education). However, it should be noted that, as the same report states, the threat of the COVID-19 pandemic became an opportunity to exploit the possibilities offered by the digitisation of learning content. Since 2020, the Cameroonian government has been investing in hybrid education systems that combine face-to-face and distance learning. These innovations are intended to provide a solution to the problem of school dropout, which currently affects many children in Cameroon.

4. METHODOLOGY

The methodology used for the project was qualitative because, as we know, this approach helps us to understand and interpret social facts according to the meanings, actions and ways in which they are experienced by the people who experience them (Piña-Ferrer, 2023).

The sample of participants consisted of thirty-two Cameroonian students, doctoral and master's degree students at the University of Lleida and undergraduate students at the University of Yaoundé I. Many of these students, especially those studying at the University of Lleida, have experience as secondary teachers and most are from families with parents who are teachers or professors, so they can express their vision of the educational reality they have experienced from the perspectives of both students and teachers. Specifically, during 2023 and 2024, a total of eight in-depth interviews with semi-structured questions were conducted with students from the two universities (four in Yaoundé and four in Lleida), two focus groups with eight other participants (one in Yaoundé and one in Lleida);

and, finally, eight autobiographies were carried out (four in Yaoundé and four in Lleida).

In addition, the ethical principles inherent to qualitative research were considered. This study was conducted in strict compliance with the ethical standards established in the Declaration of Helsinki (2013). Informed consent was obtained from each of the participants, and personal data were protected in accordance with the provisions of Organic Law 3/2018, of 5th December, on the Protection of Personal Data and Guarantee of Digital Rights. To ensure the anonymity of the participants, each interviewee or participant in the focus groups was assigned a unique acronym. An acronym was also assigned to each autobiography. This guaranteed the confidentiality of participants at all times, thus respecting their privacy and rights.

In this descriptive article, we present only the results obtained from the autobiographies, carried out both in Spain and Cameroon. The autobiographies were identified from their profiles and using acronyms. They were written by 5 men and 3 women. The meaning of the letters and numbers is as follows: the first letter identifies the country where the autobiography was written; the second letter, the gender; the third, the year of writing; and finally, in case of matching acronyms, it was decided to differentiate with Roman numerals I, II and III. Thus, for example, CAHI23 is a student who wrote the autobiography in Cameroon (CA), is a man (H) and wrote it in 2023.

Autobiographies are the written or oral versions that subjects give about their own lives. As Aliata (2020) states, the interesting thing about the autobiographical account is that it is characterised by the specific discourse of an interpretative nature, i.e. a construction of the subject's 'self' rather than a description of facts from his or her own history.

In fact, the story in itself is an interpretation because it involves an elaboration, a way of expressing a certain view of what one wants, and in some cases, what can be remembered/told. Taking this characteristic into account, understanding and interpreting are considered part of the same

process, which develops simultaneously the interpretation of the speaker and the interpretation of the listener (Arfuch, 2014).

In accordance with the above, it was chosen to analyse the results of the autobiographies for this article because they gave us access to information on the life and educational trajectories of the young participants, who were well acquainted with the Cameroonian social and educational context given that the vast majority were from families with parents or other family members who are teachers, or belong to family associations.

5. RESULTS AND DISCUSSION

5.1. Socio-economic and family context

In general, it can be said that the economic situation in Cameroon is precarious, shown by the lack of infrastructures and services, as well as the existence of political, economic and social conflicts that affect education. In terms of socio-economic development, Cameroon is still characterised by poor connectivity in terms of infrastructure and services. It has a large amount of forest resources, arable land and potential regional economies, but most transport is by road and a significant percentage of stretches remain unpaved. In the absence of railways and other means of communication, transport and transaction costs are high. This is confirmed by the following testimony:

> *The political system is democratic, but it is a poor society. As a child I grew up in the village where life was very difficult, the main activity was manual, archaic agriculture; today there is still a lack of roads, hospitals, electricity is almost non-existent, etc.... What has improved in recent years is the multiplication of primary schools and colleges.* (CAHI23)

Family models include polygamy, monogamy or single-parent families, organised within extended family nuclei not only linked by consanguinity, but also through the 'nuclear family', rooted in popular culture and tradition. In

these families, not only do parents and children live together, but also other members, often for reasons of solidarity or generosity:

My cousins also lived in my parents' house, due to the lack of schools in the villages where their parents lived. (EHII23)

Whether they are monogamous or polygamous families, the figure of the woman is important. However, not only the mother, but also grandmothers, aunts, sisters, cousins, etc. are the main educators. Although the burden of educating children falls on women, "African motherhood is multiple because the communicative function is eminently social in many African structures, which makes motherhood co-responsible with the woman in labour, aunts, neighbours or figures such as the mother of the town (who supports executive power complementary to the chief or governor) or the sacred mother who is the link between the visible and invisible worlds" (Revilla, 2022:13).

They are the transmitters of traditional values, and are valued not only for carrying the burden of organising and carrying out all the household activities, but also for being patient and tolerant. One of the students affirmed that, in Cameroonian society, the perfect woman is the one who is obedient, who shows maximum respect for her husband. Therefore, when some girls start to show disinterest in their studies, "it is not seen as such a serious matter, because it is not necessary to study a lot in order to take care of the family; which is the first destiny of women" (EHII23).

This panorama contrasts with the profile of Western women, whose empowerment means not having to take on all the roles: working woman, mother, emotional support for the family, etc., and much less by renouncing academic training (Kamkou et al., 2024).

Within the family nucleus, it is normalised that boys and girls collaborate in the support of the family economy given its precariousness. For this reason, most of the participants speak of childhoods with few economic resources, but where respect for certain values and ethical principles was highly valued:

> *I grew up in a patriarchal society strongly rooted in African traditions, despite valuing Western studies very positively. We strongly promote solidarity, love and respect for elders.* **(EHII23)**

In this family context, people talk to each other, know how to bring each other joy through stories, jokes, dances, traditional songs, popular gatherings, etc. What the majority of them categorise as "activities that serve for family unity and cohesion". **(CAI23)**

The autobiographies gathered good and bad moments experienced by the students in the family context. They remember with particular pleasure many experiences related to schooling: the first day at primary school or, at the age of 12, entering secondary school:

> *Going to the first year of secondary school was a mark of social ascent, I wore a different uniform and I was more and more respected, that first day stuck with me.* **(EHII23)**

There was also the collaboration of teachers who processed scholarships and even helped students who could not afford to pay for their studies. There was also the obtaining of academic degrees, because this was considered a guarantee of a better future:

> *Because having this diploma not only gives you respect and consideration in the family, you are also expected to have a job in the civil service afterwards. In my family nobody has achieved this except me, and I also want to discover the university and become part of the elite class.* **(CAHI23)**

> *Of the 9 children my parents have, only one of the last ones has been able to finish high school and go to university, which is me. I'm proud of that.* **(EHII23)**

In the case of one student, she recognises that one of the most important moments in her life was at the age of six when she mastered reading: because "knowing how to read and write, I knew that I was acquiring a certain autonomy and that I could not be cheated in the future" (EMI23).

Other good moments have to do with celebrations with the whole extended family for Cameroonian or Christian traditions - such as the Catholic celebration of the First Communion, "because they are days and days of joy, celebration and dancing" (EMI23).

As for the bad moments experienced in the family context, they especially remember the death of very close family members: fathers, mothers, brothers and sisters, even friends, due to illnesses that would be easily curable in Europe. AIDS, lower respiratory tract infections and diarrheal diseases are the three most widespread and deadly diseases in Cameroon. These can be prevented and treated in Spain. The participants on the project were convinced that if the government in Cameroon were to allocate more resources to basic health care, it would be possible to create greater awareness about these diseases and thus help save thousands of lives each year.

> *I was very saddened by the death of my friend and classmate when I was 8 years old.* (EHI23)

Furthermore, many times a death is not only a human loss, but also has financial consequences (a lower salary means, for example, no longer being able to pay school fees or books) and emotional consequences, such as "physical separation from the family to go study far from home". (CAMII23)

> *My mother died in my arms... during the night... in bed and after a long period of illness. It was due to lack of money to take her to the hospital. Since my mother's death, life has become super difficult for me, because I have to pay for my studies myself.* (CAHI23)

Finally, regarding bad moments, there are those related to schooling and the difficulties of daily life since many children have to make long trips from their village to go to school every day, or they remember not having money for lunch, going with little clothing or not being able to buy textbooks, because families do not have extra financial resources.

> *At the community level, life has a happy tone, but with many political and economic upheavals that affected us on a daily basis.* (EMI23)

Also in some cases, they relive the use of corporal punishment to maintain discipline in the large classrooms of primary schools. These sample statements apply:

> *The biggest criticism is the abusive use of the whip on the learner by the teachers during classes. It was mandatory to recite each lesson and if you didn't you were punished with violence. That creates trauma in me and that is why the first decision, when I become a teacher, will be the prohibition of violence against the student.* (CAHI23)

> *The methodology was, as is known, very harsh at that time. Errors were not tolerated because the student had the obligation to assimilate all classes. Very often there were physical punishments.* (CAMHII23)

> *The students were not friends of those teachers who always punished, who were always with a stick, ready to hit, rather, they loved those who hardly used the stick.* (EMI23)

5.2. The school in Cameroon. School perspective of the different stages

When presenting the panorama of the school in Cameroon today, the participants insist on differentiating public from private education. In general, public education is more accessible (without being completely free), although this also means higher student ratios (an average of 100 children) and lower

quality in school infrastructure and material and personal resources, which leads to greater difficulty to attending to the student efficiently. There are even schools that are completely open-air and without restricted access, in some cases without adequate facilities for the hygiene of minors:

> *The Lomié public school in the Haut-Nyong department is an educational centre built during the German protectorate, later rehabilitated by the French and the State. The school is built outdoors and anyone has access.* (EHI23)

> *At my school in Adjéla we didn't have toilets and people took care of themselves in nature, if necessary.* (EHII23)

On the other hand, private schools, both secular and Christian, attended by only 23% of all school children in Cameroon, are better equipped with material resources and teaching and administrative staff. Architecturally, their buildings are well built, frequently located in the centre of the town or neighbourhood and "include extensive patios where you can enjoy games at break time" (CAHII23). They usually do not have more than 50 students per class, and have specific classrooms (computer science, science laboratory, etc.) as well as rest rooms for teachers and an office for the management.

Teachers, whether they work in the public or private sector, show concern about the high student class numbers and long working days, which leads to a decrease in educational quality. Likewise, they consider the weight of theoretical content to be excessive compared to the psycho-pedagogical qualities inherent to their teaching work. In other words, when serving such a large number of students – especially in public schools – the teaching is merely theoretical: the teacher dictates or writes the lesson on the blackboard and the students copy it in their notebook or solve problems on the board.

> *A teacher for everyone. For the seven levels. She told us that it is a very complicated job.* (CAHI23)

> *There are those who come and only dictate the contents to us... they dictate to us and during the evaluation, they want us to reproduce the same thing they have given without reinterpretation or reformulation.* **(EHI23)**

In short, this is very traditional learning, basically by rote. The informants tell us that, given the shortage of teachers, sometimes students who have recently graduated from secondary school already begin to work as teachers in infant and primary schools.

> *At the age of 20 he was already a teacher of some first-year high school students. I was very young and very small, and I had to put up with other young people who were almost my age and who disrupted classes.* **(EHI23)**

Cameroonian teachers perceive that they face complex working conditions in relation to: low salaries, social frustration, lack of cooperation between professionals or lack of educational ethics on the part of government authorities. Despite these conditions, they seem to care about their teaching vocation: self-training in declarative and instrumental knowledge, student motivation, emotional management and authority. This leads them, according to their own opinions, to earn the respect and support of the families.

> *I highlight their love for the profession, their patience, curiosity and the desire for the teachers had to attend better to the diversity in their classrooms.* **(CAHI23)**

In reference to the secondary stage, the participants in the study have passed, among others, through the following schools: School Bilingual de Zoétélé, Lycée Classique de Gobo, Lycée Bilingue de Ngong, Groupe Scolaire Bilingue La Félicité, College Saint Thomas D'Acquin and Collège Privé, College La Confiance/Bafoussam, Lycée de Lomié. They report that these centres they were much better built than the primary schools and located in larger towns. To give an example, the Collège Saint-Thomas D'Aquin in Bafoussam is a Catholic school with good facilities:

It was the perfect secondary centre for me. The school was very large and each course had at least three classrooms with about 40 students per class. The centre also had many resources: computer rooms with computers, laboratories with the necessary equipment, party rooms, a chapel, sports fields, green space, large patios, auditorium, libraries, musical instruments, etc. and the teaching staff were highly qualified for all areas of teaching. **(EHI23)**

In general, they highlight that the secondary schools had many more teachers than in primary, and different teachers for each subject. They were more welcoming and motivating for doing school work and that encouraged meetings with students' parents to solve problems.

To close this section and, with respect to higher education, the participants are content with the existence of universities in all regions of Cameroon (as pointed out above, there are already 11 universities around the country), but at the same time they indicate the need to increase human, material and logistical resources to ensure high-quality training. Thus, for example, they point out that there is a frequent lack of classrooms in the faculties and this causes the number of students to exceed or even double the capacity, which means arriving at class a long time before the start to be able to enter. Sometimes, the lack of spaces means that two classes are scheduled in the same space:

There must be a very good collaboration with the administration to harmonise and respect the annual calendar, etc. **(CAMHII23)**

The assignment of rooms was another planning and organisational problem, because, for example, several times we have come across students from a different degree than ours who had classes in the same classroom and at the same time, you know? You arrive and have a class, but another teacher comes with his students. What do you do? If your teacher has not arrived before, then you lose the class. **(CAMHIII23)**

This situation means that the first to occupy the classroom are those who receive the class, creating conflicts between teachers and frequently generating a climate that is not always conducive that can lead to conflicts between students. Faced with this situation, many students decide not to attend classes in person.

The informants also tell us that there are books not enough books in the libraries of Cameroonian universities, and that these are outdated and do not correspond to the demand of either students or teachers. They are poorly equipped technologically, and access to the Internet is not fluid. They propose that a solution would be to create online learning platforms, as a virtual campus.

As for the teaching staff, it is common for them to be overwhelmed by the high ratios and the lack of an academic organisation that has a direct impact on the students and their academic success rate. Without a doubt, these deficits reduce the possibilities of students to be able to align themselves with the demands of globalisation and reach the same level as their peers from Western universities which have human and material resources, that operate on well-equipped campuses adapted to the educational requirements, with teachers who are more professional have greater and have a commitment to the training of their students.

Despite the above, they also value the level of training and continuous effort of their university professors and the need for them to feel supported by the Ministry and educational authorities:

> *I believe that teachers are also affected by the lack of motivation, the lack of resources, because from the start, the majority, at least the ones I have had, have good training, it is clear that they are trained. But I think that as time goes by, they end up becoming discouraged, they end up moulding themselves to the system that promotes a certain mediocrity, a certain slowness, a certain procrastination, and the result is that in the end the quality of their teaching does not reflect the level of training they have.* **(EMII23)**

Regarding the issue of lack of motivation of teachers, Kem-mekah Kadzue (2016) concludes that 66.66% of the Spanish teachers surveyed in his study negatively value the experience of being a teacher in Cameroon.

> Informant 2: "*Difficult due to economic difficulties, students do not have textbooks.*" Informant 4: "*More or less difficult because we face many problems, especially material ones.*" Informant 9: "*The profession is not attractive because of the poor working conditions.*" Informant 10: "*It is difficult because more and more students are not very interested and do not make an effort to learn better.*" Informant 12: "*Paid little for a lot of work.*" Informant 14: "*It is a profession that faces difficulties, since it requires infrastructure and teaching materials that allow the reconstitution of the context of immersion.*" Informant 30: "*It is difficult due to the lack of teaching materials and the disinterest of the students, the remuneration is very low.*" Informant 36: "*Very difficult due to the number of problems we have: lack of documents, weakness of students due to lack of interest, discouragement with respect to German teachers.*" (Kem-mekah Kadzue, 2016, p. 200).

They also point out that academic programmes are based on theoretical knowledge that is often disconnected from the practical needs of the country, making it impossible for Cameroon's emerging development as foreseen in the development plan until 2035. Along the same lines, Kem-mekah Kadzue (2012) states in his study that:

> We do not have an education contextualised towards ours. For example, in foreign language learning books we are told about Juan and Pablo. Why not have a book that talks about Tamo and Kamdem. Nor do university studies also in Spanish literature studies have any relationship with Cameroonian cultural realities (Kem-mekah Kadzue, 2012: 129).

In short, an improvement of the Cameroonian University requires the government to promote and undertake dedicated initiatives in an effective way, which involve a large economic investment: in material resources, in improving the technology of its campuses, in the permanent training of teachers and in improving their working conditions.

5.3. Family-school relations

One of the challenges that 21st-century schools must face is the relationship between the school and families (Vecina et al., 2024). The importance of establishing good relationships between the school and families, and, by extension, with the surrounding sociocultural and educational community, is beyond doubt (Andrés-Cabello & Giró, 2020). As Garreta and Llevot (2022: 317) point out, "both what is done by families at home and the degree of their involvement in school is strongly marked by the information that circulates between both and that is usually directed or controlled from the school institution, which is the one that has the most power in the relationship."

The results obtained show that there is concern and monitoring by Cameroonian families regarding the education of their children, both within the school institution and outside of it (reinforcement classes, extracurricular activities, etc.). Families show a proximity to teachers, considering themselves "friends of teachers," and a concern about the relationship between financial resources and school success rate, as well as for the lack of help that they, as parents, can provide as the academic contents become more complex, which is why they usually attend academic tutoring when requested.

> *My school was open to activities and involved students and families: it organized extracurricular activities, tournaments with other centres, theatre or film activities on Fridays with families, etc.* (EHI23)

The Unity school maintained very good relations with its surroundings. It used to organise discussions with the parents of the students to solve problems encountered with the latter. (CAMHIII23)

I would speak of an environment of collaboration, solidarity and familiarity, in the end... we were in a place where almost everyone knew each other and communication between members of the educational community was easy... I saw the relationship between school and environment, as good. (EHII23)

On the contrary, lower attendance and involvement are detected in the meetings organised by the Student Parent Associations, whose work is still limited to specific procedures for "financial aid or conflict resolution" (EHII23).

5.4. The management of diversity in the Cameroonian school

5.4.1. Intercultural education in the class

The rich linguistic and cultural composition of Cameroon is a constitutive element of its school reality. As Martínez (2019) states, the role of education centres, management teams and teachers is always key in the process of managing cultural diversity. A school that has members who are aware of diversity will have starting points, in theory more efficient, for addressing the challenges of cultural differences, as well as other aspects linked to social and educational disadvantages.

In reference to cultural diversity, the Educational Guidance Law 98/004 of Cameroon stipulates verbatim in its articles 14 and 15 that the objective is to foster real social cohesion far from thoughts from a colonial perspective and to promote intercultural education within the national territory to guarantee mutual knowledge, and thus avoid conflicts such as the recent "Anglophone crisis" that is still a reality in the country. The separatist crisis in the southwest of the country dates back to 2016, with the start of peaceful protests by the English-speaking population over their inability to access courts, schools and public works.

The education system is organised into two subsystems. The above-mentioned education subsystems coexist, each maintaining its specificity in evaluation methods and certifications. (Law of orientation of 14th April, 1998).

The analysis of the autobiographies confirms that a great cultural diversity is observed in the composition of the students in schools, especially those in cities.

Teachers acknowledge having difficulties when it comes to addressing cultural diversity due to the high ratios in the classrooms. And on the other hand, both the lack of training in intercultural skills and the lack of material and logistical resources mean that sometimes passive management of this great diversity is handed over to students:

> We are all brothers, the children of Cameroon. And all these children that we are, we have the obligation to build Cameroon. So a good teacher has the obligation to encourage this. because from tribalism comes, let's say, rage, death, xenophobia and all this. (EHI23)

> The majority of teachers were people who came from other ethnicities and who did not share many cultural elements with us; hence the origin of the conflicts. (EHII23)

As Astudillo et al. (2023) state, one of the pending challenges is the initial and ongoing training of teachers and other professionals in the social field, considering in a transversal way, and also in specific subjects, cultural and religious diversity in a transversal way, and also in specific subjects, within an open, intercultural and inclusive school. In the case of Cameroon, to date, few teachers have received specific training in management and attention to enable them work on cultural diversity in their teaching studies.

As this testimony points out, conflicts of a tribal nature arise that make school coexistence difficult, and, lacking cultural mediators (Kamkou et al., 2024), it is the students who perform this role by becoming involved in these

processes voluntarily and spontaneously. This is what Llevot and Bernad (2021) call a natural and/or informal agent/mediator.

Note that the educational contents still make few references to the true national and cultural identity of Cameroon. That is why, at the end of their training, students have more knowledge about Francophone or Anglophone culture than about their own culture. This is perceived as a Westernised educational system that has little to do with traditional Cameroonian education prior to colonisation. According to Sanz (2011), African and Cameroonian education based on oral tradition consisted of a group of elders who, in a community-based manner, initiated children and young people into ritual aspects that would help them develop in adulthood. As a result of colonisation, the official teachings of the colonising countries were imposed and many countries lost their language, culture and roots. In the case of Cameroon, a Western cultural element is transmitted through school which is totally alien to the cultural tradition of the 250 ethnic groups that inhabit Cameroon.

In any case, the informants also state that, in recent years, initiatives have emerged to work on cultural diversity. These include holding a cultural week that aims to bring together oral tradition, art, gastronomy, dance, dresses, etc. to the students, or the bilingualism day, which aims to improve the coexistence of the two co-official languages. They are highly-valued proposals since they promote mutual knowledge and the participation of families, even if it is only at these specific moments of the school year.

5.4.2. Linguistic diversity

Africa is the only continent where the majority of children start school using a foreign language. In most of the continent, the idea persists that the widely used international languages (English, French, Spanish, Arabic and Portuguese) are the only means to achieve economic mobility (Ouane & Glanz, 2010).

In the case of Cameroon, French and English are the teaching languages despite the fact that Cameroonian students come from multilingual contexts. In addition to speaking their mother tongue in their daily, every citizen living in the 8 French-speaking regions or the 2 English-speaking regions has internalised French, which functions as the lingua franca in the French-speaking area, and/or English, which is the main language in the English-speaking area. Also noteworthy is the existence of languages in evolution, such as Pidgin English and Camfranglais, which are very popular among young people. (Kem-mekah Kadzue, 2018: 71).

Let us remember that around 230 local languages are spoken in the country and, for many years, these have been relegated to the domestic and informal settings.

Some participants point out that the Ministry of Education has hardly shown any real interest in the recognition and promotion of native languages. This is despite the fact that in the revision of the Constitution in 1996 the government officially declared itself in favour of the promotion of national languages. Some programmes, such as the *Association national des comités de Langues camerounaises* (ANACLAC), have been launched to promote the learning of these languages (Mba, 2013, p. 8). Their objective is to design teaching models for the Cameroonian national languages adapted to the school with the aim that, at the end of the secondary cycle, students are capable of speaking and writing their mother tongue while knowing their own culture and being integrated into their language and culture, but also open to the world (Kamkou et al., 2024).

In this sense, we agree with Sanz (2011) when he states that the great challenge to achieve full schooling in the primary stage from 6 to 12 is the question of languages since educational processes are mainly in the languages of the colonising foreigners. By relegating local mother tongues to outside the school, the possibility of establishing a relationship between the school and the traditional forms of knowledge of different ethnic groups (traditional stories, ancestral stories, songs, etc.) is reduced. These cultural

and spiritual elements of one's own culture are linked to the native languages and are much more attractive for children, especially in primary education. In addition, they allow the family to be an active part of the learning process by speaking the local language with their children.

Since 2013, there have been initiatives to incorporate the learning of nationals into secondary schools, for which the five most popular languages were chosen: Ewondo, Bassa, Duala, Ghomala and Fufulde. Thus, the Yaoundé I Normal School is training teachers in these languages to teach in educational centres with the aim of bringing students closer to their own cultures and awakening their interest in Cameroonian diversity. However, "due to the lack of teachers, these five languages are only taught in some schools in the country's larger cities" (EHII23).

The challenge is to train teachers to address multilingualism, as well as to offer relevant and good quality teaching methods and materials that will produce higher performance and lower dropout and repetition rates throughout the education system. It is necessary to be aware that the use of indigenous languages in the classroom can facilitate communication and learning, in other words, it can empower students. In this sense, the negative perception of the student/teacher must change since they have often internalised a feeling of shame and contempt towards their ethnic languages. This has had negative consequences on learning and the construction of individual identity.

> *I was 14 years old and I still remember how my classmates distorted my name (which is in my native language) to obtain another (negative) meaning in another language.* (CAMII23)

We believe, therefore, that teaching in the local mother tongue has many advantages and added values in addition to breaking the mental schema of Cameroonian girls and boys about the superiority of European languages. Multilingualism is a capital that must be used in the long term. As Ouane and Glanz (2010) state, the choice of languages, their recognition in the

educational system, the development of their expressive potential and their access to a larger audience is what is recommended in the commitment to an inclusive school.

5.5. Gender perspective

One of the aspects to highlight from all the information obtained through the research carried out is how the gender perspective is worked on and experienced in Cameroonian education and society. In Cameroon there are no explicit policies related to the gender perspective, with patriarchy being the predominant form of social organisation.

In relation to the gender perspective, the existence of a gender disparity with slight signs of improvement in recent years is shown in the Cameroonian educational context. the number of girls and young students enrolled in primary school is increasing, but there is still a gap between the sexes at the secondary and higher levels. Among other causes, this is due to the fact that for girls, the reality is often pregnancy in adolescence, early marriage, the need to help or take charge of household chores, doing paid work in markets, subsistence agricultural work, the daily collection of water and firewood, caring for younger siblings, etc.

> *In almost all the towns where I have studied, women did not have much importance for men. Therefore, there were quite a few parents who sent their boys to school while leaving their girls at home. That view of things pushed me to work so that no one would treat me like the women I saw... and to be able to make my own decisions*. **(CAMII23)**

Specifically, the northern area of the country, mostly Muslim, is the most affected by absenteeism or early school leaving among girls, because few families give importance to female schooling. The predominant ideology in this part of the country conceives correct feminine behaviour as linked to

marriage and service to the husband and home, which implies pressures on girls and young women that lead them to abandon the school system.

> *Why aren't girls put in school? Because parents think that girls are made for homes, so sending the girl to school does not interest them.* (CAMI23)

As Bella (2015) indicates, despite the efforts we see in the recent political will to involve and integrate women into state universities in Cameroon, the proportion of these in formal networks and decision-making bodies remains very testimonial. To this we must add that, even at higher education levels, women are discriminated against by restricting them to certain fields of study, such as social work, nursing, teaching, etc.

It is clear that, faced with this reality, a change is needed. Specific strategies in favour of women must be planned and there must be a guarantee that they will be implemented and monitored to facilitate and favour their socio-educational and professional inclusion (Kamkou et al., 2024). There is still a long way to go to reduce female illiteracy, particularly in rural areas, and give a greater number of women access to professional activities oriented towards the various fields of development.

6. REFLECTIONS AND CONCLUSIONS

There are several authors (Mba, 2013; Kem-mekah Kadzue, 2018; Quinzaños, 2019) who affirm that Cameroon is like a "miniature Africa", since it has an important cultural and religious diversity in the territories that make it up in addition to being highly multilingual with its almost 29 million inhabitants speaking about 230 local languages (Mongo, 2023). All its rich cultural heritage invites us to constant reflection to promote real endogenous social cohesion far from thoughts from a colonial perspective and to commit to intercultural education throughout the country to guarantee mutual knowledge and, incidentally, prevent the recurrent ethnic conflicts seen in some areas of the country.

Focusing on education, the Cameroonian educational system is governed by a series of official laws that mark the different levels into which it is structured, from the pre-school stage to the university level, passing in turn through vocational training and with both public and private, secular and religious sectors. One of the state's main objectives is to improve the educational quality of the country, which is reflected in the increase, year after year, in enrolment at various academic levels. However, there are still numerous barriers that prevent making an end to the inequalities within the system.

Through this qualitative research, we have sought to delve into the functioning and state of the educational system based on the experiences and worldviews of young Cameroonian university students.

Thus, it has been seen that Cameroonian society continues to be structured in a "traditional" way and although importance is given to education, it is greatly influenced by the various conflicts and social patterns existing in the country, with marked differences due to gender and social status, as well as difficulties for inclusion and coping with diversity.

There is little visibility in the educational content of references to the cultural and linguistic reality of the country. Thus, at the end of their academic training, students have more knowledge of Francophone or Anglophone culture than about their own ethnic group. In this way, it perceives it as a "Western" system that does not have Cameroonian features nor is it impregnated with its own culture.

Since the knowledge of official European languages and cultures is synonymous with being cultured, with having power, prestige and success associated with modernisation and development, and is valued especially by the Cameroonian elite, a situation of imbalance and marginalisation is generated with respect to the indigenous languages in relation to the conditions that favour social progress. Thus, these languages are held in much lower esteem and tend to be restricted only to informal domestic spaces, and are barely present in nursery and primary school, which

coincides with academic failure and the dropout of girls and boys, especially in rural areas (Mongo, 2023).

Therefore, the incorporation of local languages is Cameroon's great challenge to keep children in schools until the end of primary school. The key to achieving this may be in the use in schools of traditional stories, ancestral stories, songs, etc., that are part of the everyday life of African peoples, and which are associated with the mother tongue.

Private schools in Cameroon are characterised by notably better conditions than in public ones, although the importance of teaching work is highlighted as a means of educational improvement, whatever the situation of each school. Precisely if Cameroon wants to be part of the emerging African countries, it must invest in its human capital through the comprehensive training of students in pedagogical innovation, intercultural competence, critical thinking and, of course, taking the gender perspective into account. Traditionally, there have been gender inequalities in access to education. These have perpetuated regional differences, differentiated realities between urban and rural areas, cultural beliefs about women, the lack of an educational policy that promotes gender equality and gender violence in the school. Therefore, the figures show that girls are less likely to attend school and complete secondary education than boys. Their dropout rate is higher, which has important consequences for educational success and long-term human development. Women who lack access to education are disadvantaged in many aspects of life, including health, the economy and political participation. These data highlight the need to continue working to improve human development in Cameroon and, specifically, to strengthen the university system while also facilitating access and continuity in the higher education of young women.

On many occasions the role of teaching staff and the quality of education in general is limited by the conditions given - resources, ratios, low wages, etc. - reflecting a need for improvement in this regard. This occurs in both primary and secondary schools and university centres. The need to improve the

channels of communication and participation of families is also proposed (Kamkou et al., 2024) as is the need to hire mediators (to learn more about the role of the professional mediator, see Llevot and Garreta, 2024) to manage ethnic conflicts that, at times, hinder good coexistence in classrooms.

Thus, it can be concluded that this is a country with great cultural wealth in every way, but one that still faces problematic conditions that prevent education from being enriched by this and prospering optimally. This reflects the need to adopt changes with the aim of achieving a school and university marked by attention to diversity, inclusion and equal opportunities. These, in turn, would allow an improvement in school enrolment rates and the development of a better educated country with greater opportunities for growth.

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